MERRY GIRLS of ENGLAND

By L. T. MEADE

50¢

To

Felecia Quinn

for

Merit in St. Mary's Sunday School

1909 - 1910

Ellen F. Ryan, Teacher.

MERRY GIRLS OF ENGLAND

By L. T. MEADE

Author of "A World of Girls," "A Sweet Girl Graduate," "Polly," "Good Luck," "A Gay Charmer," etc.

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MERRY GIRLS OF ENGLAND

CHAPTER I

COCOA AND SWISS MILK

It was a tempestuous March day, the dust flew in great clouds, the air was full of grits. The angry east wind had a riotous time, and the three girls who walked up the steep hill toward the end house in a neat terrace in the old-fashioned town of Charlton had difficulty in keeping on their hats, and their gay, fresh voices could scarcely be heard above the roar of the elements. The fact that they were being blown and buffeted about, that Barbara's hat was being made sport of by the angry wind, that Clemency's long fair hair was beaten cruelly against her face, and that Ursula, the middle sister, was suffering keenly from the dust which blew into her eyes and throat, scarcely appeared to affect their spirits. There were small discomforts abroad certainly that afternoon, but the girls themselves did not mind, being young and healthy.

Barbara was nearly sixteen—a tall, slender maiden—showing a good deal of leg, somewhat big feet, long arms with rather ungainly hands, square shoulders, and a face full of determination and power. Ursula was thirteen and a half—a pretty girl, with a deter-

mined chin. Clementcy was still the baby of the family, and her age was ten.

The girls struggled and ran, for they knew that they were late for tea. To be late for this meal meant a heinous offence in the eyes of Aunt Jane. It meant so grievous a fault that it required a salutary punishment. Punishment with Miss Jane Motley was always thought out carefully. She judged, perhaps wisely, that cause ought to be followed by effect. Hers was a very orderly house, punctuality at meals was essential. If the girls did not appreciate this fact it was her duty to make them do so; if they did not care sufficiently for their bread and butter and tea (the bread was generally stale and the tea weak) let them do without. Miss Motley made this rule some years ago, and never yet to the knowledge of Barbara, Ursula, and Clementcy, had she been known to relax it. They were late this evening, and they knew well they were in for no tea and a good scolding.

"And I am so hungry," cried Ursula, "I did not have half enough dinner; the mutton was underdone, and I could not eat it. I know too that that dreadful leg of mutton is going to be served up cold for supper; it really is too bad."

"Never mind," answered Barbara; "whatever happens, don't let us fret about it. Girls," she added, flashing round her bright brown eyes on her sisters, "I do enjoy being rebellious now and then."

"It is not Aunt Jane I mind so much," answered Clementcy, making her dancing steps keep time with her sisters, "it is Rosamond; I hate vexing Rosamond. If she would speak out and be cross, it would not trouble me a bit; but she never does that, she just looks—you know how. I do love Rosie so much."

"You love Rosie so much," echoed Ursula, "then please don't talk of that as if it were a virtue. You would just be the most ungrateful, unnatural little heathen that ever breathed if you were not devoted to her. Where should we all be now without Rosamond, I should like to know?"

"Well, we have got her, so we need not think of that unpleasant possibility," said Barbara. "She is there, always to the fore, always ready to comfort us, to sympathize with us, to fight our battles—such a dear old angel. I wonder, for my part, if she ever could be angry."

"Yes, she could," said Ursula, turning round in her eagerness to face her sisters. "Once I saw her," she continued, "in an awful rage. Oh, it was a proper rage, of course, so you need not frown at me, Barbara, for beginning to tell. I would not tell tales of Rosamond for all the world. I love her just more than anybody, almost as much as if she were dear mother come back again, but once she was angry, and it was with Aunt Jane. I remember now it had something to do with a will."

"Then you were a very bad girl to listen," said Barbara. "When Rose chose to give vent to her feelings she certainly did not wish for an auditor like yourself. I for one am not going to listen to your stories, so don't begin. Oh, here we are home at last. How blown I feel, and untidy! My eyes are full of grit and my throat quite parched; what would I not give even for a cup of Aunt Jane's weak tea! Clemency, just turn around quickly and give a look at the town clock. I am afraid to look myself. Oh, my heart goes pit-a-pat; suppose it is really too late, suppose it is past the hour for that most essential and comforting meal."

"I am afraid you must bear up, Barbara," said Ursula. "Here, lean on me, my love. You will have no chance of your refreshing cup of weak tea, and your throat must go on smarting, for it is five minutes past five, and you know what Aunt Jane will say when Sarah tells her that we have all entered the house five minutes past the tea hour."

"Well, I feel inclined to cry," said Barbara. "I never wanted my tea more in all my life."

"Nor I," said Ursula.

"Nor I," echoed Clementcy.

"And there is not a ghost of a hope, I suppose," said Ursula.

"Not the slightest," said Barbara. "Don't you remember how severe Aunt Jane looked at dinner? She complained of a headache too, and her face was paler than usual and her lips more tightly shut. Don't we all know that mood, and how incorrigible she is when she is in it? Even Rosamond can do nothing with her then. Yes, we must give up tea. Only five minutes late! How near and yet how far that all-seductive meal appears under the circumstances!"

"We *must* have tea," said Ursula suddenly. "I know what we can do. Have you got your purses in your pockets, girls?"

Clementcy's bright blue eyes opened wide at this sudden speech.

"Oh, Ursula!" she cried, catching hold of her sister's arm and beginning to dance up and down, "you don't mean——"

"Yes, I do," said Ursula, looking daringly back at the younger child. "I am desperate, and desperate measures must be resorted to. In for a penny, in for a pound. We are five minutes late—oh, more by this time, six minutes, perhaps even seven, and we shall

have no tea to-night, unless we provide it for ourselves. Now let us open the purses. Barbara, yours comes first, how much does it contain?"

"Very little, indeed," said Barbara, with a sigh. "I spent two or three pence this morning on watercress and seeds for my bullfinch. This represents my worldly all at the present moment, a sixpenny-bit and three halfpence."

"Golloptious!" cried Ursula. "What may not sevenpence-halfpenny do when dealt with properly? Now for my purse. Good gracious! I only possess a penny. I did not know I was so poverty-stricken. Clementcy, you are generally the rich one. How much does that neat little sealskin bag of yours hold?"

"A threepenny-bit with a hole through it," said Clementcy. "But I do not want to part with my threepenny-bit, Ursula; I have made up my mind to wear it with my gold watch and chain when I get them."

"You ridiculous child!" cried Barbara, "nobody wears watches with gold chains in these days, the combination is nearly as obsolete as Aunt Jane herself. When you do get a watch, Clementcy, you will have to wear it in a leather bracelet round your arm. How are you to manage to stick your threepenny-bit on to that? Come, out with your spoil, love; our united forces come to elevenpence-halfpenny. Now then, you—Ursula—run down that side street; go to Jones the grocer, and purchase twopence-halfpenny worth of cocoa, and the smallest tin of Swiss milk that he sells. A halfpenny worth of sugar ought to do; and all the rest of the funds I will lay out in buns. You, Clementcy, had better creep down the area steps, slip in by the back door, go softly upstairs, reach our darling attic, bring out the spirit lamp and

the cups and saucers, and, in short, prepare for the grand meal. If we don't drink hot cocoa as sweet as honey, and eat lots of buns, in spite of Aunt Jane, my name is not Barbara Underhill."

Clementcy, her face blazing with excitement, instantly did what she was told. It was very dangerous to have to pass so close to the kitchen. If the old cook, Joan, saw her she might complain to Aunt Jane. And if Aunt Jane knew, and Rosamond by any chance found out? If any of these things happened, Clementcy knew too well that there would be trouble. Still, the daring, delightful scheme was worth running a certain risk for. Hot sweet cocoa and unlimited fresh halfpenny buns were too fascinating to be lightly foregone. It was worth making a real effort to secure such delicious stolen pleasures. Clementcy's heart beat high, but she resolved to run the gauntlet of the dreadful kitchen premises. To her relief the little girl found that the back door was on the latch, that the kitchen and passages downstairs were to all appearances empty; she ran softly upstairs, passed the dreaded entrance hall, and by and by reached the large attic which she and Barbara and Ursula shared together. Having done so, she proceeded to lock the door, and then flung off her hat, and tossing her long hair out of her eyes she arranged the spirit lamp, and then began to wash up the dolls' cups and saucers, out of which the cocoa would have to be drunk.

By and by other steps were heard hurrying up the stairs, and Barbara and Ursula, very red in the face, made their appearance.

"We came in the back way," said Barbara, "and I assure you, Clementcy, we didn't meet a soul. Where can Joan be, and Polly the kitchen maid, and

where can that staid old Sarah have hidden herself? As to Rosamond, you know she is generally just poking her head round the drawing-room door when we are the least bit late."

"Neither did I meet a soul," said Ursula. "The house was as quiet—as quiet as the grave, I was going to say—but never mind anything about that now, let us set to work at once. I for one am more thirsty than ever, and my throat more full of grits. Ah, the water boils. Now then to get the tins of Swiss milk and cocoa open—I have got my little knife handy."

Barbara flung off her hat, Clemency unfastened her thick warm pelisse and dropped it conveniently on the nearest bed. A rickety small table was brought forward, the tiny cups were placed on it, a little cocoa was put into the bottom of each, then the Swiss milk judiciously added, then boiling water, the concoction stirred, and then the contents eagerly drunk off. Cup after cup of cocoa was made. The girls felt as if their thirst could never be slaked; the remains of the Swiss milk was finally put upon the buns in lieu of butter, and they all enjoyed their impromptu meal thoroughly. Their spirits rose as they ate and drank, and they forgot to be as quiet as caution would have recommended. Clemency, who was always the merriest of the party, had just given vent to a shrill, childish laugh, when the handle of the attic door was turned, and a sharp imperative knock was heard without.

"Unlock the door at once, young ladies," called Sarah's voice from the landing.

"Oh, dear! what are we to do?" said Ursula, turning pale. "Do, Clemency, clear everything under one of the beds as fast as possible; if Sarah goes down and tells Aunt Jane, the fat will be in the fire."

"You talk so vulgarly, Ursula," reproved her little sister, her blue eyes dancing.

The knock came again outside and Sarah's voice was heard a second time.

"Do open the door, young ladies."

To Barbara's surprise, it had not the usual angry note in it; on the contrary, there was a thrill of a sort of terror running through it.

"Miss Barbara, are you within? We did not know any of you young ladies had returned from your walk. Oh, yes, I hear you, miss, in the room; please come here this minute."

"You must wait one moment, Bab," cried Ursula. "Here, Clemency, what are you staring at? Do pull yourself together. Kick all those buns out of sight. Here go the tins, and oh, all the cups and saucers. Everything has vanished under that convenient bed valance. Please see if there are any crumbs sticking to me. Yes, I'm all right. Bab, let me brush you before you open the door."

"Miss Barbara, Miss Barbara!" cried Sarah from without.

"I cannot keep her waiting any longer," said Barbara in a whisper. "I am all right now. Don't make such a fuss, Ursula." She marched to the door with a certain defiance and flung it open.

Sarah was waiting outside, her face quite stained with tears; there was also a shaken, terrified sort of look round the corners of her lips.

"What in the world is the matter, Sarah?" cried Barbara, staring as she saw these signs of emotion on the face of the staid, respectable-looking servant. "What has upset you?"

"Sally-in-our-Alley, has anything gone wrong?" asked Ursula in her pertest voice. But then she also

saw Sarah's face, and the little gibe died away on her lips.

"You stay upstairs, Miss Ursula—and you too, Miss Clemency," said the servant. "Miss Barbara, Miss Rosamond wishes to see you at once in the drawing-room."

"Dear me, what can have happened?" said Barbara. "If Rose wants me, why does she not come up here? And there, I declare, you are crying again. Is—is anything wrong?"

"Miss Rosamond will tell you, miss; I can't."

"Stay where you are, girls," called Barbara. She flew past Sarah and ran quickly downstairs. Her knees seemed suddenly to give way under her, a heavy weight began to oppress her heart, and there was a sense of bewilderment in her usually clear little brain. Of course, something dreadful had occurred; she had an awful momentary sensation of the incongruity of the situation. To pass from the merry, frivolous little scene in the attic bedroom to the solemnity of the drawing-room seemed to her quite out of keeping. What did Rosamond want with her, and why was Sarah crying? She flung open the big door of the luxurious room, pushed aside the portière curtain which shut away all draughts, and entered in her usually breathless fashion.

Suppose Aunt Jane had found out about the stolen tea; suppose she was angry, hopelessly angry at last?

When Barbara, Ursula, and Clemency were more than usually naughty, Aunt Jane was wont to frighten them with a threat of sending them to a certain severe and impossible school. Suppose she had made up her mind to really send them there at last, and suppose Rosamond's heart was broken at the thought of part-

ing with her three rebellious young sisters? Oh, dear, after all, the sweet cocoa and the nice fresh halfpenny buns would not be worth this.

"I know what I must do," thought Barbara, "I must just go on my knees to the old thing and beg her pardon in the most downright, humble way. Nothing shall induce me to part from Rosamond. I'll promise to do without tea for a week, if that will satisfy Aunt Jane. But oh, how did she find out—how did she find out?"

Barbara's eyes looked quite large and defiant, and her face paler than usual, as she suddenly confronted Rosamond at the other side of the drawing-room door.

Rosamond was leaning against one of the curtained recesses, her hands were clasped tightly together, her fair, sweet face wore a stunned expression. When Barbara's sudden step was heard she gave a violent start, then stretched out her arms.

"Oh, come here to me, Bab!" she called out, "I want you so badly."

"What is it, what is the matter?" cried Barbara.

"Hold me tight, Bab dear; perhaps I shall be able to realize it now that you are close to me. You were out when it happened, and on the whole I am glad. Oh, I shall never forget it"—here she shuddered—"but I am glad you were out, and that you did not see, and that Ursula and dear little Clementcy were spared the shock."

"But what is it, Rosamond?" said Barbara. "Do you know, you terrify me beyond words. Won't you tell me what has really happened? Has Aunt Jane found out about us?"

"About you, Bab? Have you done anything wrong, and now?"

"No, nothing really dreadful. But what is it? Is Aunt Jane awfully angry because we were late?"

"Aunt Jane will never be angry with you again," said Rosamond. "Barbara, she is dead."

CHAPTER II

SHE ALWAYS LIKED THE SAFFRON CAKES

When Rosamond said these words, all her self-control gave way. She leant suddenly up against her sister and burst into a terrible fit of sobs. Barbara stood, pale and brave, holding her in her arms. Barbara was nearly as tall as Rosamond, and much more strongly built. She shook herself now several times, and even stamped her foot in order to keep back her own tears. Not for the world would she give way, on account of Rosamond. Presently the elder girl was better; she allowed Barbara to lead her to a chair, and began to talk.

"Bab, I will tell you exactly what happened."

"Oh, don't talk now if it is too much for you, Rosie."

"I shall be better when I have spoken about it a little. It is all so sudden, so unexpected. I am very glad you were all out of the house; you might never have got over it."

"Well, I for one would have got over it just as well as you," said Barbara. "You know, Rosie, although I am younger than you in some ways, in others I am older and stronger. You poor darling, you look quite awful; your lips are blue, and your eyes have such a startled expression in them. Unless it relieves you, pray don't talk of it now; but, of course, if it does, I am quite willing to listen."

'But are you not shocked yourself?" said Rosamond. "Does not the news—the news that she—*she* has gone, make you sorry?"

"I must be frank or nothing," answered Barbara. "At the present moment I am neither shocked nor sorry."

"That is because you are stunned, because you feel it too much."

"Well, well, perhaps so. Now speak out, old dear, if it relieves you," said Barbara.

"I have not much to tell, after all," answered Rosamond. "She seemed quite well at dinner."

"We thought," began Barbara; then she stopped abruptly. It had never been any trouble to her to say unkind things of Aunt Jane, but now that she was dead, she seemed to have suddenly risen to a sort of eminence. Barbara felt deep down in her heart that she could never, even in the slightest degree, abuse her again.

"She was quite well at dinner," continued Rosamond, not noticing her younger sister's hesitation. "I was so glad when I saw that she liked her food; she quite enjoyed the pudding, don't you remember? Well, afterward, she said she would lie down on the sofa in her morning-room and go to sleep, as she had a slight headache. I went away to write her letters for her. I was absent for over an hour; at the end of that time I came in to fetch the address book. I trod quite softly, for I did not want to disturb her. I glanced at her as she lay on the sofa, and was pleased to see that she was so quiet. I thought she was taking such a nice nap. 'She will be really refreshed when she awakes,' I said to myself, and I went down to the kitchen to ask Joan to make some hot cakes, those special saffron cakes which Aunt Jane has al-

ways been so fond of. Oh, dear," continued Rosamond, shuddering. "I shall never be able to eat saffron cakes again, and Joan made them beautifully, too."

"Well, do go on, Rosie," said Barbara. "You need not cry so dreadfully hard just because you have thought of the cakes."

"It is the little things that are so affecting," said Rosamond brokenly, putting up her handkerchief to her eyes, and trying to stem the torrent of her tears.

"Well, try and tell me the rest; how did you find out when—when *it* happened?"

"It was not I fortunately, for I really do not know what I should have done; it was Sarah. You know, at four o'clock Aunt Jane always had her tonic, and Sarah brought it to her as usual. She was still, to all appearances, very sound asleep, but Sarah thought she looked queer and she bent over her, and then of course she knew at once. Aunt Jane must have been dead for nearly an hour, for she was beginning to get cold. Oh, Bab, how awful it all is! I do so wish I had never been unkind to her. Oh, how sorry the thought makes me now! It was only yesterday that I answered her quite sharply, and this afternoon I felt vexed at having to stay in and write the letters, and now I can never do anything more for her again. Poor Aunt Jane; poor, dear Aunt Jane!"

"Did you send for a doctor, and is *she* still in the morning-room?" asked Barbara, beginning to shudder herself for the first time.

"Of course, we sent for Dr. Haynes; he said death was caused by apoplexy."

"What is that?"

"Something dreadful, but I don't know much about it. They have taken her to her bedroom. Poor

auntie, poor auntie! I wish I could recall the past—I wish I could feel now that I had done more for her."

"Well, Rosie," said Barbara, standing up as she spoke, "if that is all that is troubling you, pray dismiss it from your mind; you have simply been an angel to her. Now, if it was Ursula, or Clemency, or I, we might have something to reproach ourselves with."

"She always thought of you three as the children—it was on me she leant."

"And I am sure you made yourself just a martyr. But there, we won't talk of it any more."

"No, darling, we won't," said Rosamond in her softest tone.

She felt comforted by Barbara's strong words, and now she leant her pretty head on her younger sister's shoulder.

"Rosie, have you had any tea?" asked Barbara, who felt quite old and practical now that Rosamond for once had given way to natural weakness.

"Tea! I could not touch it."

"But you ought to take it—yon never needed it more than you do this minute. I'll run and get it for you."

"You have had no tea, either."

"No, but we had cocoa. We were naughty, we were late for tea, and of course we thought—— Oh, well, never mind that part now; we had one of our secret cocoa parties up in the attic. We were enjoying ourselves immensely when Sarah knocked at the door. It was a shock to see Sarah, and then I ran downstairs and found you. Oh, dear, how merry we were in the attic!"

"Barbara, did not you love Aunt Jane at all?"

"I don't think so, not really," said Barbara, looking

across the room and wrinkling her heavy eyebrows. "Of course, I am sorry she is dead," she added abruptly, "and I promise you faithfully, Rose, that I will never all the rest of my life say a word against her again—but just for this once I must speak my true mind. It was because she made you so pale and worked you so hard, and never, *never* once saw that you were just an angel too good to live, that made me hate her."

"Don't speak like that, Barbara," said Rosamond; "you really torture me."

"I won't; that is the last ugly thing I will ever say of poor auntie. Now, shall I run upstairs and tell the others?"

"I'll go with you," said Rose; "it comforts me to be near you. I never knew you were half so strong."

The elder girl tottered to her feet and pushed back the hair from her flushed, tear-stained face.

"I think," she added, as, helped by Barbara's stout young arm, she went upstairs, "I want Clemency to kiss me more than anything else in all the world. Dear, darling Clemency, our baby."

"Well, she shall hug you to your heart's content. Now here we are. Girls, I have brought Rose upstairs, and she has something to tell you. Be very good to her, both of you. Clemency, give her your very biggest of big hugs. I am going downstairs to fetch you up the very nicest cup of tea Joan can make, Rose."

CHAPTER III

MISS MOTLEY'S "SIDE LIGHT"

SEVEN years before the events which have been related in the last chapter, there was a sad scene in a London lodging in a dull street. A dying woman was bidding her children good-by. There were four children—the youngest three, the eldest twelve.

"Rosamond," said the mother, taking the elder girl's slim hand in hers, "you must go to my friend Miss Motley when I die."

"Oh, mother, please don't talk of dying," said Rosamond.

She was a pretty child, with a bright color in her cheeks and lovely chestnut hair; the cheeks grew pale now, and the blue eyes filled with tears. A little dark girl who was seated on the bed spoke suddenly.

"Do let mother talk, Rosie," she whispered—here she fixed her own solemn brown eyes on her mother's face.

"Yes, mummy," said Barbara, aged ten, "we will all do just what you wish."

"Run away, Bab," said the mother. "Take Ursie and little Clementcy with you. I want to be alone with Rosie for a few moments."

Barbara got down off the bed, and taking the hands of her little sisters left the room. She felt very hungry and cold, and she did not at all like going away.

"I shall not live till the morning, Rose," said the mother, the moment the door had closed behind the other children. "Now that the time has really come, I am glad—but for the thought of you children, I should be very glad. I have fought up to the last moment, but there is no fight in me now. When I am gone, darling, you will find a letter in my trunk—there is a purse there also, with just enough money for your railway journey. I collected the money week by week, and I know there is just enough. My clothes and my other belongings must pay the rent which we owe to Miss Pearson, and of course the parish will manage the funeral. Don't cry, Rose—God is very good, and something tells me that Miss Motley will look after you; and as for me, I shall have rest now—and I am dreadfully tired."

"But who is Miss Motley, mother? I never heard of her."

"She was my old schoolmistress," said Mrs. Underhill. "I lived for several years with her—she educated me, and she was always most just and most kind; she was a little severe now and then, but I did not mind that. I know she has plenty of money. If she will take you and look after you, you will all be well provided for. She is the sort of woman who always did her duty, and I have put the matter very plainly in my letter. The duty of looking after you four would not appeal to anyone else, but I think it will to her—at the worst, she will give you good advice."

"Have you written to say that we are coming, mother?" interrupted Rose.

"No, it is better to take her by surprise. You will find the letter in my trunk. Oh, I feel that it will be all right."

Rose stooped down and kissed her mother on her forehead. The dying woman closed her eyes and faintly smiled. Presently the other children crept into the room, and huddled on to the bed and stared at the gray face on the pillow. By and by they all dropped asleep, even Rosamond, who had vowed that she would not close an eye. Towards midnight Mrs. Underhill died.

One week later the little sisters left the London lodging. Rosamond had the precious letter in her pocket. The children were not even in mourning; there was no money to buy any. The landlady got up early and went with them to Paddington Station. Here she took their third-class tickets and put them into a carriage, and told Rosamond to be sure to look out for Charlton when they came to it on the line.

Charlton was the town where Miss Motley lived. It was situated about a hundred miles out of London, in the heart of a pretty country.

The children reached Charlton between twelve and one o'clock.

"As we have no luggage," said Rosamond, "we need not go to the expense of a cab. Here, Clemency, I'll take your hand. Barbara, will you walk behind with Ursula?"

The four children left the station very sedately. Rosamond felt quite old and wise—the present moment was so all-important that she did not even feel shy. She asked several people the way, and by and by the children found themselves in Eastman Terrace, where Miss Motley's house was. It looked a very clean and grand house, and as they approached it Rosamond hesitated for the first time.

"I am dreadfully afraid Miss Motley is rich," she said, turning round and looking at her sisters.

"Rich!" cried Barbara, "I hope she is; I hate poor people."

Rosamond hesitated again.

"Well," she said, "she can but refuse us, and I have mother's letter in my pocket."

She walked boldly up the steps, followed by her little sisters. How spotless and white everything looked; how shiny the brass knocker on the door! There was a queer little brass button also in the wall, with the word "Press" upon it; it shone like a looking glass.

"That is the bell," cried Barbara; "they have those new sort of bells now in some of the London houses. I saw them when I was out walking lately; here, I'll press it." She did so; a sharp musical sound was instantly heard to go through the house; an old woman with a crabbed, wrinkled face put out her head from the kitchen premises; she drew it in again as quickly as a jack-in-the-box. Notwithstanding the solemnity of the occasion, Barbara felt inclined to laugh. Then the hall door was flung wide open, and a stately middle-aged servant stood before the children.

"Is Miss Motley at home?" asked Rosamond.

"Yes, miss," answered the servant; she spoke respectfully, but her eager, curious eyes surveyed the little group from head to foot.

"I want to see her, please," said Rosamond again.

"You cannot now, miss; she is at dinner."

At the word "dinner" Clementcy raised her pretty blue eyes to the servant's face.

"Clem vevy hungry," she said.

"Perhaps you had better come in, miss," said the maid to Rosamond. "I will take you to a room, and let my mistress know that you are all here."

She opened the door of a sort of waiting-room to

the left of the hall as she spoke. The children entered. The hall felt warm and delicious, and so did the waiting-room; the house was well heated by hot-air pipes.

"Will you give me your name, miss?" said the maid to Rosamond.

"Please say that I am Rosamond Underhill, and that I have brought a letter from mother," said the little girl.

The maid withdrew, closing the door softly.

Clementcy crept close up to her elder sister and began to cry. Now and then she said, with a great gulp in her throat, "Clem vevy hungry."

Rosamond took her in her arms and began to stroke her little flushed face.

At the end of half an hour the servant came back. "My mistress will see you, Miss Underhill," she said, "but you had better leave the other young ladies here."

"I would rather take them with me, please," said Rosamond. She lifted Clementcy into her arms. Ursula clutched hold of Rosamond's gown, Barbara followed in the rear.

The maid, raising her brows in astonishment, crossed the hall, threw open the door of a big room, and motioned to the children to enter.

A tall, very slender lady, dressed in dark gray, with iron-gray hair to match, and piercing, somewhat small black eyes, was standing at the further end of the room; she was looking anxiously and in some wonder in the direction of the door. When she saw the four children she gave a perceptible gasp. Rosamond went straight up to her.

"Are you Miss Motley?" she asked.

"That is my name," replied the lady.

"Then I have brought the children," said Rosamond, "and a letter from mother."

"Mercy me!" exclaimed Miss Motley, "stand back, please, little girl. You say you have a letter?"

Rosamond had to put Clementcy on the floor in order to find the letter; she pulled it out of her pocket and presented it to Miss Motley.

The room felt deliciously warm; there was a lovely scent of flowers; all of a sudden Rosamond felt a great lump in her throat; Clementcy began to cry softly, and to bury her little head in her sister's dress. "Clem vevy hungry," she moaned.

Miss Motley popped down as if she were shot into the nearest chair, and began to read the letter.

When she had read it about half-way through, she raised her eyes and spoke in a brusque and apparently annoyed voice:

"Don't stare at me, children," she said; "find chairs, do. Little girl, take the baby on your lap." Here she gave Rosamond a glance which seemed to signify strong displeasure.

"Clem vevy hungry," lisped poor Clementcy.

"What is the child saying?" asked Miss Motley.

"She wants her dinner," said Rosamond. "She has had nothing to eat for some time; but it does not matter," she added.

"Not matter! Of course it matters," said Miss Motley; "I never heard of anything so inhuman in my life. Ring the bell, one of you, this minute."

Rosamond could not find it. Barbara, who was much quicker, made a dart in the right direction and gave the bell a violent press.

The hasty summons was answered by the stately servant.

"Sarah," said Miss Motley, "bring cake and a jug of milk here directly."

She then turned once more to her letter. She read the letter from beginning to end; then, without uttering a syllable, put it into her pocket. The servant came in with the refreshments; Miss Motley stood up and helped Clementcy to a great chunk of seed cake and a large cup of milk. The little girl ate hungrily. When two cups of milk were disposed of and two great hunks of cake, the lady of the house rang the bell.

"Take all these children into the dining-room, Sarah," she said, "and see that they have a right good meal; when they are well attended to, come back to me."

"It must be all right," muttered Rosamond to herself, as she crossed the wide hall, "but I do wish—yes, I do——"

"What is it, Rose?" whispered Barbara.

Rosamond shook her head.

"Nothing," she answered.

"I know what you mean," said Barbara again; "she is going to be kind, but she is going to be hard. I am not sure that I shall like to stay here."

"Oh, do hush, Bab; you'll spoil all if anyone hears you."

Meanwhile Miss Motley was pacing up and down her drawing-room.

"I never was more startled in the whole course of my life," she said aloud. "Four children to arrive unexpectedly, and a letter from their poor mother asking me to adopt them! Well, if a woman was ever struck of a heap, I surely am that one. The children have not the most remote claim on me. Of course I was fond of Ursula Maberley, she was my favorite pupil;

but if I did not warn her not to do the very thing she did, my name is not Jane Motley. Over and over I said to her, 'Whatever you do, Ursula, be careful you do not commit an imprudent marriage.' Well, of course she did, and of course she had four children, and of course she died without a friend, and now the children belong to me; a nice family for me to undertake all at once. Let me see; of course I could refuse Ursula—of course I might keep the children for a night, and then—I don't really see why I am called upon to do more; still—yes, there is no doubt of it; this is a most important matter; I won't act on my own judgment."

Miss Motley approached the bell and rang it.

Sarah answered the summons.

"Sarah," said Miss Motley, "the children who have just arrived will stay here until to-morrow morning."

"Yes, madam. Where are they to sleep?"

"In the spare room, of course. Have a cot put up for the baby, and a small bed for the next girl; the two elder ones can sleep together. Get Susan to light a fire at once, and have the room made thoroughly comfortable; and now send Hopkins to me."

Hopkins was the gardener and general factotum. He appeared within the next ten minutes at the drawing-room door. When he did so, he was given a note to take immediately to the Rev. John Stapleton.

"Come to me at once, dear friend; I am in a predicament—Your sincerely, JANE MOTLEY," were the brief words the note contained.

"The vicar is the right person to consult in this emergency," thought Miss Motley.

Within half an hour Mr. Stapleton answered Miss Motley's note in person.

"I knew you would come quickly," she said; "this is excellent. Now just sit down; I have something to consult you about."

She then told him from beginning to end the whole story of her friendship for Ursula Maberley.

"She was my old pupil," she said; "a very pretty, impulsive sort of girl; I was wonderfully fond of her." Miss Motley then proceeded to give an account of the arrival of the children, of Clemency's hunger, of Rosamond's motherly air, of Barbara's impetuous face, of Ursula's beauty.

"They are handsome children," said Miss Motley in conclusion. "Not, of course, that looks matter. Beauty is deceitful; I know that fact, as well as anyone, and I make it a rule never to spoil children. Of course, too, they are no relations of mine."

"It is very kind of you to take them in," said Mr. Stapleton.

"Do you think so?" she answered; she gave him a curt and somewhat displeased glance.

"Of course," she continued, "I consider it my duty to consult you, for you are my spiritual pastor and master. I am supposed by most people to be a rich woman; in reality, however, I shall have very little to leave after me when I die. To undertake the care and education of these children is an important matter; what do you advise?"

"You really wish for my advice?"

"Certainly, or I should not have sent for you."

"Frankly, then, I think that you ought not to act on impulse."

"Do you? You are a minister of the Gospel, remember; I have a dim sort of memory of the Bible saying—— But I need not go into that. Will you

have the goodness to read the letter which the little girl Rosamond presented to me to-day?"

The clergyman read it carefully from beginning to end. It was a very pathetic letter, and in spite of himself a lump came into his throat.

"Something certainly ought to be done for the poor children," he said, "and of course there are several institutions."

"You advise me, then, to consider the matter and to make inquiries about institutions where orphan children are received?"

"It would be wise, would it not?"

"Oh, yes, it would be wise!" said Miss Motley, rising, "but somehow it would not be my style; it would not be at all the sort of thing that young mother expected when she wrote to me. I think I need not trouble you to wait any longer, Mr. Stapleton. You are a minister of the Gospel, and it did just occur to me that you would tell me it was my manifest duty to receive these orphan children and do the best I could for them."

"My dear Miss Motley, if such is your conviction, of course that would be the best of all," said Mr. Stapleton.

"I think so—it is a clear case of duty—not perhaps pleasant, for I am a fidgety old maid; but when duty appears, one's own personal likes and dislikes ought to vanish out of sight. You have doubtless many other visits to make, so don't wait any longer. You have obliged me by coming, and I make it a rule in any great emergency never to take a step without getting what I call a side light on it; you have been my side light, you have made my duty appear plain, and I am obliged to you."

A moment later Mr. Stapleton found himself out-

side the door. He walked down the street with a curious sensation in his ears, as if someone had boxed them. He did not quite know himself why he deserved this treatment.

Meanwhile Miss Motley sent for Rosamond.

"My dear," she said, "I have read your mother's letter; she wishes me to adopt you."

"Yes, ma'am," said Rosamond, raising her eyes.

"You know about this letter?"

"Mother told me the night she died that she thought you would take us all in."

"Did she indeed? She must have been a woman of very great faith."

Rosamond said nothing, she only shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"She was right to have faith," said Miss Motley; "she knew me well. When I see my duty I always endeavor to do it; I am a hard woman, however, my dear, and never on any consideration pet children. You can go back to your sisters now."

Before twenty-four hours were over, the whole house in Eastman Terrace had undergone a metamorphosis. A daily governess had been found and engaged to look after the little girls from nine to six every day. Certain rooms were devoted to them; and before a week had passed, little Clementcy began to wonder if she had ever lived in any other house.

Miss Motley was true to her word; she adopted the children, and did the best she could for them. She got them mourning for their mother, she attended to all their wants, but never on any occasion did she bestow upon them an affectionate word; it was not her nature to pet children. She saw to their health, and looked after their education, and there the matter ended.

As Rosamond grew up she devoted more and more time to Aunt Jane, as Miss Motley had instructed the little girls to call her from the first. In her way, therefore, and because her nature was most affectionate, Rosamond grew fond of the old lady; but Barbara, Ursula, and Clemency had very little love for the woman who had educated and supported them, and who now lay dead in the beautifully ordered and methodical house.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT AUNT JANE SAID IN HER LETTER

On the day of the funeral the will was read. Miss Motley had only one relation. He was a barrister, living in London. He came down to Charlton to attend the funeral, and stayed afterward to hear the reading of the will. By this he inherited two thousand pounds and the house in Eastman Terrace with the furniture. The four children were left one thousand pounds between them, and a life interest in a small farm, about twenty miles out of Charlton, which went by the name of The Gables.

The girls in their black dresses stood close to each other while Mr. Johnson, the lawyer, read Miss Motley's will aloud. It was a very short will, for there were no other legacies of any sort. Having finished it, he stepped forward and handed Rosamond a letter.

"This is from my late client," he said. "She asked me to deliver it to you after her death."

Rosamond received the letter with outward calmness; she closed her fingers over it, and only Barbara noticed that they shook.

Then Mr. Motley came up to speak to the children. He had a kind voice and a gentle, gracious manner. He patted Ursula on her beautiful little head.

"Do you know," he said, looking at Rosamond as he spoke, "that, relation as I am, I feel like a kind of

intruder. By all rights you are the real relations; my aunt adopted you, and always spoke of you as if you were her own children. I wish it had not been necessary for her to leave me this money, but in reality she had no choice in the matter. The two thousand pounds with the house and furniture were to revert to me whenever she died, and I cannot give them up on account of my own children. The rest of her income was derived from an annuity, which ceases with her death. My dear girls, I am really puzzled to know how you are going to manage."

"We shall manage all right," answered Rosamond, speaking somewhat proudly. She could not bear Mr. Motley to feel that they expected him in any way to help them. "A thousand pounds is a good deal of money," she continued; "at least, it seems so to me."

"It is very little money indeed," said Mr. Motley. "I don't know how you four girls can possibly live on it. But there, I must catch my train now, and you had better consult Mr. Johnson. I shall ask Johnson to render you any assistance in his power. I wish you to understand also that if it is within my province to help you, I shall be only too delighted to do so."

Then he shook hands with the four girls and hurried away.

Early the next morning the lawyer had a long interview with Rosamond.

"Mr. Motley is much interested in you all," he said. "If he had not such a large family of his own, I have no doubt that he would really do something substantial; but as it is, he is not rich, and the money he has received from his aunt is of some consequence to him. Still, he bid me to tell you that if he could really help in the matter of your education or anything of that sort——"

"We don't want any help," interrupted Rosamond. "Aunt Jane did a great deal for us. I am educated, after a fashion, and now we must all do the best we can. I was nineteen on my last birthday; I am really quite old enough to support myself."

"But can you do anything special?" said the lawyer. "I am told that this is the age for specialists; is there any one thing you can do better than anybody else? Have you been well educated?"

"I am sure I am not a specialist," answered Rosamond, smiling; 'and," she added, still with that slow smile on her lips, "I have been educated according to Aunt Jane's ideas."

"I see, I see," interrupted the lawyer; "tch! tch! What a pity! Modern requirements are so exacting. It is my duty to tell you, Miss Underhill, that the sort of education you have received is practically useless —that is, from a teacher's point of view. Governesses in these days must have certificates and all kinds of testimonials before they can expect to get situations worth having. Besides, I am given to understand that at the best the profession is much overcrowded. Then, even if you are educated after a fashion, there are your sisters. They are not grown up."

"I know that," answered Rosamond; "the three girls have been going to a high school, and, I think, were doing well—Barbara in particular. We must all keep together for the present," she continued.

"That is just it—how are you to keep together? I can see by your manner that you have not the faintest idea what a very little money a thousand pounds represents. Of course, it would be very unwise for you to touch the capital, and I can only safely invest it for you at four per cent., even that being doubtful.

Four per cent. means forty pounds per annum. Now four people cannot live on that sum."

"But there is The Gables; the farm brings in a rent, does it not?"

"I have been making inquiries about The Gables," said Mr. Johnson. "I find it is a very small farm, and dreadfully out of repair. The house wants a great deal done to it; the outhouses are in a shameful condition. The land has not been properly tilled for years. The fact is, the late tenant went bankrupt, and at the present moment the place is unlet. Of course, I shall try without any delay to let it again, but at the present rate of things I don't expect we shall get more than sixty or seventy pounds a year, and a good deal of the rent at first must be expended in necessary repairs."

Rosamond's eyes grew suddenly bright.

"Do you know," she said, "I am almost glad the farm is unlet. I think, Mr. Johnson," she continued, "that you must give me twenty-four hours to consider matters. I will then tell you if I have any plan to propose."

"Well, my dear, you are a good girl, and seem to be endowed with plenty of common-sense—common-sense is a much rarer possession than people suppose. You have it, and I wish you well. I will call here to-morrow at twelve. Oh, by the way, Mr. Motley begged of me to say that he hoped you would not hurry out of the house. You are to keep the servants and he will be answerable for all expenses for at least a fortnight."

"Thank you," replied Rosamond.

The lawyer looked as if he would like to pat her on her shoulder, but, thinking better of it, shook hands with her and the next moment left the house.

When he had done so, Rosamond went slowly upstairs to her own room.

Barbara, Ursula, and Clemency slept in the big cheerful attic which ran across the front part of the house, but Rosamond for several years now had occupied a little chamber close to Miss Motley. There was a door of communication between the big room and the little, and often at night Rosamond had gone gently into the old lady's room to see if she wanted anything, or simply to kiss her and glide back again to her own small bed. It was at these times that Rosamond really found out something of what was in Miss Motley's heart, for the stern eyes would glisten and grow soft as they watched her, and the lips would curve into sweet smiles; and sometimes the old voice would quite shake with suppressed emotion, for Miss Motley possessed one of those natures not so uncommon among a certain class of Englishwomen—she had a heart full of love, but had never the power to express it, except in deeds. Many and many a time the words trembled on her lips, "Rosamond, I love you. God bless you, Rosamond, for all you are doing for me," but never had these thoughts been spoken. Rosamond, however, possessed a great deal of intuition, and she understood the old lady far better than any of her sisters did.

She now seated herself on the side of her little bed, and, taking Miss Motley's letter out of her pocket, read it for the fourth time.

"My Dear Rosamond [it ran]: When you are reading this, I shall be no longer in the world. You have just reached womanhood, and are—for I have watched you carefully—a sensible and good girl. I have often longed to tell you how fond I am of you,

and how much happiness you have brought into my life. Words, however, have not been given to me; but when you read this, I hope you will understand. I now want to speak very plainly to you. You are not brilliant in any way. You have no talent sufficiently remarkable to induce me to waste much money on your education. You are fairly well taught, but you are not educated according to the standard of the present day. My dear girl, from the time I adopted you and your sisters it has been my secret grief that I could not leave you, whenever I died, at all well provided for. Before you came to me I had sunk the greater part of my capital in an annuity. When you and your sisters arrived, it was impossible to alter the state of affairs. All I can leave you is one thousand pounds in cash, which I have saved year by year from my income, and the life interest in a small farm of the name of The Gables. Now, my dear girl, you know very little about money. It is true that you are nineteen, but since your mother's death the rough things of life have not touched you; and although I have been far from well lately, I have always been able to manage my own money affairs. You may in your innocence think it quite possible to live on the sum of money which you are left, but please don't harbor this idea for a moment. The thing cannot be done. You cannot even feed yourselves on the small income which one thousand pounds will produce. Now, as to your capital, I am not going to bind you to any hard-and-fast rule in the matter. I wish you clearly to understand that you four girls are to have this sum of money unreservedly. There is to be no waiting until you come of age. Mr. Johnson will keep the money for you, but he is to hand it over to you by my instruc-

tions whenever you ask him. The money is equally divided between you; you can all have the advantage of it, or you can each have your fourth—namely, two hundred and fifty pounds. My advice to you is to touch very little of the capital, and to supplement the income if possible; then you will have something to fall back upon when the proverbial rainy day comes. If you ask Mr. Johnson, he will give you the best advice, and I hope sincerely you will consult him.

"Now, I will make a suggestion which may appeal to you, and if you think you can safely carry it out, it is, in my opinion, likely that you will do well. I have left you not only a thousand pounds, but the life interest in a small farm. The farm consists of twenty acres of land; there is a cottage on the farm and several farm buildings at the back of the house. Now why should not you and your sisters live at The Gables, and stock the farm from a certain portion of your capital? You might spend very little money at first, and Mr. Johnson would help you to find a trustworthy man who would give you advice and a certain amount of assistance until you had learned the rudiments of farming. There are plenty of books on the subject; but, of course, advice from a modern farmer would be more valuable to you than anything which you learned from a mere book. You are all four young and strong, and life in the country would be splendid for your health. The farm produce would largely keep you in food; and if you sold eggs, really fresh eggs, and presently went in for a little dairy farming, you would in all probability add to your income, and make the thing pay. Think this over, my dear.

"Yours affectionately,

"Jane Motley."

This common-sense letter, without a scrap of sentiment in it from first to last, had almost bewildered poor Rosamond the first time she read it. She was a reserved sort of girl, and seldom acted on impulse. She therefore said nothing about Miss Motley's letter to her sisters on the previous evening; but at night, when she got into her little bed and tried to close her eyes, the thought of her old friend's suggestion came back to her again and again.

Rosamond was nothing if she was not practical; and the more she considered the idea of the farm life, the more it seemed to appeal to her.

"I have a great mind to try it," she said to herself. "In the first place, it seems the only sensible thing to do, for we cannot live on forty pounds a year; in the second, it would be good for our health, and would keep us all together; in the third, there is a possibility of its succeeding and giving us enough money to live in comfort. It is true, of course, that I know nothing whatever about farming. I have lived all my life in town; but I am young and can learn. We might begin by keeping chickens and selling eggs, and then by and by go on to keeping a dairy and selling milk and butter."

These thoughts mingled with Rosamond's dreams. On the next morning the idea of the farm returned to her like a strong, refreshing tonic; but up to the present she had not breathed a word of the subject to any of her sisters.

Now, having read the letter for the fourth time, she went downstairs. Barbara was seated in a deep armchair in the drawing-room, devouring a book.

"Well, Rosamond," said Barbara, as her sister came in, "have the secret confabs come to an end? Do you know, nothing irritates me more than the feeling

that secrets are going on in the house. What a long conversation you had with Mr. Johnson! And then, instead of coming to us, you ran away—I suppose, for a confab with yourself. Now what does it all mean?"

"Yes," said Ursula, who ran in at this moment, "what is to become of us all, Rosie? I saw Sarah crying just now, and she says she is so sorry for us, for we are going to be awfully, dreadfully poor."

"Just as poor," said Clemency, who had followed her sister into the room, with her blue eyes very wide open, "just as poor as when mother was alive. Ursie says—for she remembers it, but I don't—that we did not even have enough fires when mother was alive."

"I don't think there is any necessity for us to be cold again," said Rosamond.

"You look quite excited, Rose," said Barbara; "have you any plan to propose?"

"Yes, I have—a wonderful plan—I want to talk it over with all of you. Don't you remember that Aunt Jane left me a letter?"

"Don't I remember?" said Barbara; "I should think so. Have not I for the last twenty-four hours been dying with curiosity to know what the letter contained? Out with the news, Rose. I do sincerely hope it is something cheerful; I am so sick of gloom and drawn-down blinds, and people talking in whispers. Perhaps, Rose, your news is that Aunt Jane has hidden away a lot of money in a jar, or jam-pot, or something. In story-books old ladies often store away money in out-of-the-way corners. Is there a secret in that letter which the lawyer is not to know, nor that tiresome, stiff Mr. Motley?"

"No secret of that kind," said Rosamond, shaking her head; "only just a piece of valuable advice."

"Oh, advice!" said Ursula, curling her pretty lips; "I hate that sort of thing."

"Well, I doubt if you will hate this when I tell you about it; but now I really won't say a word more until after tea. I am dying for my tea, and here comes Sarah with the tea-things."

Sarah pulled out the pretty little round table which Miss Motley had used during her lifetime; on it she put a white cloth embroidered with marguerites, and then the tea service. Next tea, cream, cake, and bread and butter made their appearance. A bright fire burned merrily in the grate—the day was a sunny one, toward the end of March. The blinds were up, and the cheerful light streamed into the pretty room. Clementcy began to laugh when she saw the tea, and Ursula looked around her with a sigh of relief.

"I cannot help fancying," she said suddenly, "that any moment the door will open and Aunt Jane will come in. You know, Clementcy, how she would look, don't you? with that soft white shawl on, her face very pale, and her eyes kind, but her lips a little stiff. Oh," she added, breaking off abruptly, "why, Sarah has brought us fresh bread. Aunt Jane would never allow that, would she?"

"Now eat, and don't talk so much," said Rosamond, drawing a chair forward for her little sister. "I wish, Ursula," she added, "you would try to understand how really, really good Aunt Jane was to us all."

"I know, but I was always afraid of her," said Ursula with a shiver; "I could not help it, Rosie."

"She was very, very good," said Rosamond. "I don't know where any of us would have been but for her. It was not her nature to pet anyone, nor to say loving words, but she had a great, good, kind heart. I cannot help fancying that by this time she has met

mother up in heaven, and mother has thanked her for her goodness to her children."

The three other girls looked intently at Rosamond when she spoke. Ursula gave vent to a sigh, and Clemency helped herself to another piece of bread and butter.

"I for one," said Bab, "feel dreadfully inclined to laugh. Would it shock your feelings, Rosamond, if I were to indulge the horrid risible sensation which is tickling my throat just now?"

Rosamond did not speak.

"Oh, dear!" continued Barbara. "Please, Clemency, pass the cake. How oppressing the last week has been! There have been moments when I have not dared to listen to the sound of my own voice. You know, I could not drop it to a whisper, like the rest of you; and now—perhaps it is the sunshine outside, or—or the reaction, but I just don't feel as if I could be miserable a moment longer."

"Aunt Jane does not wish you to be miserable," said Rosamond. "Now do finish your tea; we have a lot to consult about afterward."

"I am glad to know it; the inertia of the last week has been not the least trying part about it. Do you know, Rose, you are looking so solemn, and you have primmed up your mouth in such an extraordinary way, that I still am firmly convinced Aunt Jane has left us remarkably well off."

"And you are right," said Rosamond suddenly, "only she has not left us well off in the way you mean."

Barbara sprang impatiently to her feet.

"Ursula and Clemency," she said, "for goodness' sake, do be as quick as ever you can gobbling up your bread and butter and cake. I see by Rose's face

that there is something most interesting to follow. As for me, I have had enough to eat."

She ran up to the French window as she spoke and flung it open. Outside there was a beautifully kept garden with a smooth lawn. Barbara stepped out and began walking up and down. There was a cold wind blowing, but she did not feel it; the March sunshine was falling over her. She caught up a tennis ball which had been left on the grass unnoticed from last year's tennis, and began to toss it about, catching it from one hand to the other. Some neighbors in an opposite house saw her, and remarked one to the other on her want of heart. Barbara saw an elderly face glancing at her from one of the windows with a look of strong disapproval. Out of a spirit of defiance she tossed the ball more violently and more recklessly than ever. Presently Rosamond called her. She found the tea-things had been removed, and that the moment had arrived when the secret which the letter contained was to be revealed.

CHAPTER V

THE HEART OF THE SECRET

Barbara hurried into the drawing-room, closed the French window, and went straight to Rosamond's side.

"Now," she said, "be quick about it; what is the news?"

Ursula and Clementcy had seated themselves close to their sister; Rosamond made room for Barbara at her other side.

"If you like," she said, "I will read Aunt Jane's letter aloud."

The three girls glanced at each other with dubious expressions.

"The letter is sure to be very long," said Barbara, "could you not tell us the principal part?"

"Very well, I will," answered Rosamond. "Now do listen all of you, and please, Clementcy, don't fidget. Aunt Jane thought of us all; she could not leave us more money than she has done."

"A thousand pounds is heaps of money; I am not complaining about that," interrupted Barbara.

"That is just the point, Bab," said Rosamond. "In reality, a thousand pounds is not near enough—that is, unless we all make up our minds to live on the capital, which would be, as Mr. Johnson says, very silly. The income of a thousand pounds might produce forty pounds a year. On that we cannot live.

Even I, who know little or nothing about money, can see that."

"Well, but there is a farm somewhere," said Ursula, "a farm with a pretty name—The Gables, they call it, don't they?"

"I am going to talk about the farm in a minute," said Rosamond, her eyes brightening. "Aunt Jane has left us a life interest in The Gables."

"What is a life interest?" inquired Clementcy.

"A life interest, darling," said Rosamond, "means that as long as we all four live, or as long as any one of us lives, The Gables is to belong to us. Now we are all young, and I hope, please God, that we may have long lives, so we may practically consider The Gables as our property."

"And if The Gables is let," said Barbara, who began to assume quite an old-world and practical air, "we shall have the rent to add to our other income."

"But that is the puzzling part," said Rosamond. "At the present moment The Gables is not let. The last tenant went bankrupt, and since then Aunt Jane has not been able to find a suitable farmer to take the place. Mr. Johnson says the farm is too small, and that farmers who really mean to make their living do not care for so little land."

"How much land is there?" said Barbara.

"Twenty acres."

"Twenty! Why, that seems to me to be quite an estate. I once heard Aunt Jane say that the garden here only contained half an acre, and I am sure I think it an immense place."

"Yes, but everything is relative," said Rosamond, "and twenty acres for a farm is not much. Now, girls, do listen—now for the heart of the secret itself."

"Oh, dear, this is quite exciting!" cried Clementcy.

"Aunt Jane has suggested," continued Rosamond —"she said in her letter that she thought it would be a good plan if we four girls went to live at The Gables."

"To live there!" cried Ursula.

"Yes, Ursie; please don't interrupt me for a moment. Aunt Jane thought that we might live there and—and become farmers ourselves—girl-farmers."

"Good gracious!" cried Barbara—she was so excited now that she could not keep her seat. She stood up and faced her three sisters.

"That plan would not suit me at all," she said. "If I am anything, I am literary—I love books. I love story-books and poetry, and the thought sometimes comes to me that one day I may be able to write. Now a farmer——"

"Particularly a girl-farmer," said Ursula.

"And I should be only a child-farmer," said Clemency.

"Never mind," continued Rosamond. "There are four of us—four to bear the burden—four to encourage each other. Barbara, you are a great deal too young to write anything yet, and there is no money at present to have you educated—that is, unless you spend your share of the capital. Why should we not all go and live at The Gables, and do the best we can with the land?"

"Do you know anything about farming, Rosamond?" asked Barbara.

"Nothing at the present moment, but I can learn." Rosamond's soft brown eyes had a wistful look. "And I think I should greatly like the life," she continued. "I have read of the country, of course; and you know, girls, sometimes we have gone there. Don't you remember the little cottage in Yorkshire,

where we spent a month after Clementcy had the measles? The old woman kept two cows and some ducks and fowls, and we used to watch her milking the cows and making butter. And oh, don't you recall the wood at the back of the house, and the flowers? There were flowers everywhere."

"I remember quite well," said Barbara. "It was June, and the briar-rose was out. I used to go and sniff at it—I thought it pretty, only it had so many thorns."

"Well, we should have flowers always round us at The Gables," continued Rosamond. "Don't you think we might be happy there?"

"Might we keep chickens of our very own?" inquired Clementcy, an anxious frown coming between her brows.

"We should keep plenty of chickens, Clem. We should have to learn at once, if we agree to undertake this thing, about the rearing of chickens, and the management of ducklings and young goslings; and presently, as we got on, we should have a dairy; and it would be the office of one of us to manage the butter, and another to learn to milk the cows. Oh, we should have plenty to eat, and we would sell enough to buy what other things we require. It seems to me that we should have a happy, delightful life."

"I see that you have made up your mind, Rosamond," said Barbara; "what is the good of consulting us when you have made up your mind already?"

"But, Bab, does not the idea appeal to you? Don't you think we should be very happy?"

"I am not at all sure," answered Barbara. "If I were thirty or forty—a poor, useless, old woman—I might be in raptures with this scheme; but I am very

young, not sixteen yet, and I am full of ambition, and I do not wish to go away from the high school."

"But I am afraid you must, for who is to pay the high-school fees?"

"If only I were a little older, and could write something that somebody would buy and publish and pay for!" said Barbara again. "Well," she added, "at any rate, I can go in for all the prizes that the girls' magazines offer, and that money might help."

"You can try for those in the country."

"But I should have no time. As I am the strongest, I should probably be elected to the delightful office of milking the cows."

Rosamond colored, and an annoyed expression flitted across her gentle face.

"Well," she said, "I for one am much inclined to try this plan. It is not as if we had choice; we cannot live on forty pounds a year; and The Gables is at our disposal. I shall go up to-night to the Free Library, and get some books about farming and the keeping of poultry, and all that sort of thing. We must each of us begin to study these books, and to work really hard to acquire the necessary knowledge."

"How determined you are!" said Barbara—she got up, walked to the window, and looked out.

The cranky old neighbor who lived in the house opposite saw Barbara's pale face as it was pressed up against the glass. Barbara, catching sight of her, backed a few steps—she was not in the humor to be watched; the world felt crooked—she was not enamored of the country scheme.

"Rosamond is so easily satisfied," she said to herself. "I never heard of girls like us becoming farmers. How Lucy Tregunter will laugh when I tell her!"

Lucy Tregunter was one of Barbara's many friends

at the high school. Barbara thought of her now with a queer contraction at her heart. She disliked ridicule of any sort, and Lucy was by no means unsparing with her taunts and jeers whenever an occasion arose to use them.

Meanwhile Clemency had climbed upon Rosamond's knees, and Ursula, nestling close to her elder sister, began asking eager questions. Barbara heard their voices, and her anger and dislike to the scheme grew greater and greater.

"They are all three for it, and I am out in the cold," she thought. "Of course, I know how it will end. Rosamond, though she is so easy-going, is obstinate when she takes the bit between her teeth. Now the idea does not suit me at all—I was not meant for a farmer, I was not meant for a country life. I never shall be able to understand poultry, nor cows, nor any of those tiresome domestic matters. I was meant for other things. This scheme is not to my mind, and it is my duty to say so plainly."

As this thought came to her she turned abruptly and went back to her sisters.

"Rosamond," she said, "I do not approve of the country plan."

"I am sorry for that, Barbara," answered Rosamond anxiously; "but perhaps you will consent to try it with the rest of us for a year?"

"I don't suppose I can prevent your trying it—the matter rests with you."

"I don't think so," replied Rosamond. "Aunt Jane has left us, young as we are, absolutely independent. We may do what we like about the farm, and we may also do what we like with our small capital. There is to be no waiting until when we come of age. We

may do what we like now. If you, Bab, really wish it, you can have your share of the money now."

"How much would my share be?" asked Barbara anxiously, dropping down as she spoke on the nearest chair.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds, of course."

"And I might do what I liked with it? I might have it now?"

"Yes, I don't see how I am to prevent you. But oh, Bab, how awfully, terribly lonely I shall be!"

Tears sprang to Rosamond's eyes.

"Don't cry, Rose," answered Barbara. "This is such an important matter that I must consider it very carefully. You say you have consulted Mr. Johnson?"

"Not exactly about this scheme, but I am going to tell him in the morning."

"And you, Ursula—and you, Clementcy, are satisfied?" asked Barbara.

"Quite," replied Ursula.

"I shall love the flowers and the chickens and the young goslings," said Clementcy.

"Well, of course, you are only a baby; you cannot be expected to think differently. But I am rather surprised at you, Ursie, for you really did get on at school."

"Well, I had to do my best," said Ursula; "but I shan't object to doing no more lessons."

"Oh, but lessons must go on," said Rosamond. "Lessons must not be given up; we will plan all our day. Oh, Bab, Bab, do join us! why should not you teach the two younger girls?"

Barbara's dark eyes brightened; this last idea evidently pleased her.

"Well," she said, jumping up, "I will think over the matter, and let you know."

She left the room as she spoke.

On the wide, pleasant landing outside the drawing-room she paused to consider the situation. Barbara was a girl full of ambition. Up to the present moment her life had been childish and frivolous enough, but there had always been a certain strength and determination about her, and from the time she had entered the high school at Charlton she had really mapped out her future with a good deal of firmness and common sense.

She was determined to reach the head of the school; she was determined to learn all that the excellent high school could impart to her, and then—then of course she must become a teacher. But the end-all of life for Barbara did not culminate in teaching others. Her little head was full of ideas; surely, at some time in her life, those ideas would be worth listening to. Suppose she put them on paper? And oh, the delight, the rapture of seeing them printed!

"If I give in to that farm scheme, I shall simply vegetate," she said to herself. "No, I am not sixteen yet, and I do not intend to vegetate. When all is said and done, Lucy Tregunter is full of wisdom; suppose I take her into my confidence?"

No sooner had this thought come than Barbara resolved to act upon it. She ran upstairs to the attic, pulled open a drawer, took from its depths her new neat black sailor hat, drew on her black gloves, fastened on her tie, and ran downstairs.

"Where are you going at this hour, Miss Barbara?" said Sarah, who met her in the hall.

"Never you mind," answered Barbara pertly.

"It is full soon and full late for you to be going out," muttered the maid, her face flushed with anger.

Barbara did not even glance at her.

"I like her the least of them all," thought the good woman as she listened to the young girl's rapid footsteps hastening down the street. "From the very first I could see that she never cared. It was all done for her and for the rest of them; a deal of anxiety gone through, and a deal of thought and care and worry borne with the patience of an angel. But Miss Barbara never took no heed; it was nothing to Miss Barbara what anyone did for her. Now Miss Rosamond—bless her pretty face!—she did care, and she was worth taking trouble for; and Miss Ursula and Miss Clementcy, they are right good children too. Miss Barbara is the difficult one. Anyone can see that with half an eye. What an obstinate curve she has to her mouth, and how big and resolved her eyes can look at times! Well, she'll never be a beauty; and if she don't mind her manners, she'll have a hard fight for it in life, I take it."

Meanwhile Barbara, quite unconscious of Sarah's wise reflections, was hurrying down the terrace. Eastman Terrace ended with a great flight of steps. These steps led into the High Street. The High Street was very gay and bright, and Barbara, in spite of herself, lingered as she walked. The gasman was going by, lighting the gas. Already it had been lit in all the shop windows. Barbara was very fond of looking into shops. She was a regular town girl; there was a big book shop just around the corner which particularly attracted her attention. She had looked often through its glass windows with a sigh of intense longing. Here were the books she envied: Kingsley's novels, Thackeray's, Dickens's, Sir Walter

Scott's. Here in neat rows they stood—so cheap, too; although Bab could never afford to buy them. She knew their names by heart, having read the titles often as she pressed her face against the glass. Ursula and Clementcy used to be annoyed with Bab when she stared so long into the great book-shop window. Thy were not so much interested in books as she was. They used to go a little further down the street, and gaze into another window of the same shop, observing the prints, and the photographs, and the picture frames, and the thousand and one little knick-knacks which stationers' shops as a rule contain. But Barbara only loved the window through which she could see the books. They represented that world which she longed to enter—that world to which she hoped some day to belong.

"After all, I am not a penniless girl," she reflected now to herself. "I could, any day I like to claim it, become the happy possessor of two hundred and fifty pounds. Two hundred and fifty pounds means an awful lot of money to me. When I have it, I shall be able to buy some of these. Fancy being the owner of Kingsley's 'Heroes'! Fancy being able to clasp between my two hands Thackeray's 'Vanity Fair'! Oh, and I see George Eliot in the corner. Once I read half of the 'Mill on the Floss'; how I did long, long beyond words, to learn more about Maggie! If I get my fortune, I can buy that book. Oh, why should not I have it? Why should I submit to that death in life which Rosamond is so pleased about? Why, with all that money I could go and live in London. Did not Lucy Tregunter tell me that girls, very little older than I am, live now in London in dear little flats? Each girl possesses three rooms, and there is a big restaurant downstairs where she can have her

meals. Why, the whole idea is heavenly; it excites me, it sets my heart beating; and in London I should be surrounded by books. I could go to the British Museum, and read there. They have at the British Museum a copy of every book that was ever printed. It would be books, books with me from morning to night. I might stop all that part of my education which I don't like—arithmetic, for instance, and French. Horrid stuff French is! I shall never make a good French scholar. But I might go on with my music; I love that—at least, sometimes. And German is not so very bad; and Latin—I have never learned Latin, but I think I should like to begin. It would be nice to be a classical scholar. Perhaps some day, if I really worked hard, I might know enough Greek to read some of dear old Homer. I have read him already in translations, but I want the real genuine thing. Oh, those books, those books! Why should a girl who thinks as I do, who longs beyond words for something greater, bigger, and grander than herself, be banished into the country to be a girl-farmer? No, I won't be a girl-farmer; I have made up my mind."

Barbara hurried on, her cheeks flushed, her heart beating wildly. Soon she reached a more aristocratic part of the town. She had now to go down hill, and to pass several terraces of imposing-looking houses; at last she reached the great mansion inclosed within gates, and with a wide gravel sweep before the door, where her friend, Lucy Tregunter, resided.

Lucy's father was in the leather trade, but that very fact made Lucy the richest, and in some people's eyes the most consequential, girl in the high school. She was a couple of years Barbara's senior, and from the

first had taken a fancy to the younger girl's piquant and uncommon little face.

Lucy was a somewhat satirical young person, and her sharp words and the keen edge of her wit were more dreaded by the girls in her class than any amount of blows and physical rough treatment.

Barbara quickly mounted the flight of steps and rang the bell at the big hall door. A servant in livery opened it, and, when asked if Lucy were at home, replied in the affirmative.

He took Barbara upstairs at once to Lucy's own private sanctum, where that young lady was seated in a swivel chair before a desk surrounded by papers, with a pen stuck behind her ear. She jumped up when she saw Barbara, and revealed a very mannish costume.

"Oh, my dear Barbara Underhill," she cried, "you must excuse me. Of all people I did not expect you. Pray don't look at my dress; I have just been for a long ride on my bicycle; I believe I went close on forty miles; I don't look much the worse for it, do I?"

"No, all the better. You look splendid, Lucy," said Barbara, giving her friend an admiring glance.

"Well, what do you think of my get-up? You can leave us, James." She nodded to the footman, who retired. "What do you think of this new skirt? You see how it is made, rather full to the front and lined with silk; of course that is indispensable, to enable you to move your legs quickly; then is not this little coat delightfully chic? Oh, dear, dear! I wish father would not object to the divided skirt; I should certainly wear it if he allowed me. But there, he is inexorable. Oh, Barbara, Barbara! I can never get over that one great grief of my life—why was not I born a boy?"

"I think you make a very nice girl, for my part,"

said Barbara; "but if you really want to be a boy, you look uncommonly like one in this half-light, Lucy. When did you take to parting your hair on one side? Oh, I know; you always wore it cut short. Then that mannish little coat!"

"Is not it a darling?" said Lucy. "Look at the pockets and the cut-away back. I think it awfully too-too."

"I suppose it is; but the fact is, Lucy, I am not much interested in dress."

"No, you poor girl, you have no chance to be. But never mind, your day will come. By the way, how old are you?"

"I shall be sixteen in a month."

"Just the most awkward age in the world," said Lucy, flinging herself back in her chair and twirling the pen which she had removed from behind her ear. "When you looked in, I was just scribbling the last pages of a paper on the awkwardness of youth; I think what I have said reads uncommonly well. Do you know, Barbara, when you appeared I was just describing you. You seem to me to point my moral better than any other girl I know."

These were the sort of remarks Lucy was fond of making, and Barbara, coloring, began to wish she had not come to see her.

"But never mind that now," continued Lucy, changing her manner in a moment. "You know I am nothing if I am not frank. I must speak out my mind, and those who don't like to hear my true remarks had better leave me."

"Well, I like you, in spite of your frankness," said Barbara.

"You dear old thing, you ought to like me all the better for it. Besides, you are frank enough in your

own way, and that is one reason why I take to you. By the way, Barbara, I was coming to see you. Of course I had heard of your trouble."

"It is not a trouble to me, Lucy," said Barbara.

Lucy put on her pince-nez and gazed critically at her friend. Then she left her seat, walked across the room, and switched on the electric light.

"Now that is better," she said. "I can talk more comfortably when I see your face. What a dear, queer, original creature you are! Have not you had a death in the family?"

"Yes, Aunt Jane died last week."

"By the way," said Lucy, pressing the electric bell as she spoke, "is it true that Miss Motley was no relation of yours after all?"

"It is quite true; she adopted us all years ago. She was very, very good to us."

"She was a peculiar and very reserved woman, was she not?" said Lucy. "Ah, is that you, James? Tea, please, at once; oh, and a plate of cold meat for me—I am terribly hungry. Barbara, would you like an egg?"

"No, thank you, Lucy; I cannot eat anything—I have just had tea."

"Well, tea for one, then, James; and be quick about it. Now then, Barbara, go on; so you are really no relation of Miss Motley's?"

"None whatever; she was good to us, better than anyone else—but oh, Lucy, I cannot help telling you the truth, I never did love her. Now she is dead——"

"Now that she is dead, are you going to be well off?" asked Lucy, crossing her legs and placing her hands in the little pockets of her smartly cut coat.

"Well, Lucy, I suppose you would think us poor, but I don't."

"I am interested in you, of course," said Lucy; "my form mistress says that you are very clever, Barbara."

"Does she really?" said Barbara, her big eyes blazing with delight.

"Yes; how you color, child! I heard her telling one of the professors the other day that you had quite a man's brain."

"Oh, how delighted I am!"

"It is terribly easy to flatter you, dear."

"But truth is not flattery," said Barbara.

"Well, well, it is for you to make it true. You are devoted to books, are you not?"

"Yes, you know it."

"And some day you have a daring little ambition to do a book yourself?"

Barbara colored.

"Oh, Lucy," she said, "how could you guess?"

"How could I guess?" echoed Lucy. "Have I not seen it in your eyes for the last year? The author mania is on you, Barbara; and now it is my duty to warn you before it is too late. As sure as you intend to become an author, look out for trouble: the rejection of your dearest hopes by the publishers; if the publishers consent to bring out your immature volume, the onslaught of the critics; the indifference of the public, who will not buy your book on any terms."

"How do you know all this, Lucy? Why should these dismal things happen to me?"

"I don't say they will; only they may, they are very likely to happen. It is always best to be prepared for the worst; that is my motto, and that is why I am seldom disappointed. Now this paper of mine on the awkwardness of youth—you don't know what a lot of thought and trouble I have given to it—I am going to send it—oh, but it is such a secret—I am

going to send it to the *Social Age*. Perhaps the editor will print it; anyhow, I am going to put my fate into his hands. If it comes out, you shall have a copy of the paper. By the way, would you like me to read the essay over to you to-night, Barbara?"

"I don't think so," replied Barbara, coloring uneasily. She knew what this meant. Lucy would read the essay, which would be in reality—for Barbara had listened to many from the same pen—extremely immature and childish; then Barbara would be asked to criticise; then Lucy would take another rough production from her desk, and read that, and Barbara would have to criticise again, and then her friend would inflict some poetry on her—poetry which was not up to the Tennysonian standard, and Barbara would have to flatter her all the time, and to hate herself for doing so. Yes, this was how Barbara's evenings with Lucy generally terminated. But she was quite determined that such should not be the case to-night. It was her turn now to have a hearing. Was not her whole future trembling in the balance, and had not she herself elected that Lucy Tregunter was to be arbiter of her fate?

CHAPTER VI

PRINCESS POTENTILLA

"I HAVE come to consult you, Lucy," said Barbara, speaking almost timidly; "that is why I cannot listen to your essay to-night. Of course, another time I shall be only too delighted."

"Oh, never mind about another time," said Lucy, coloring high. "I do not at all know that I shall be in the humor to submit my work to your frank criticism another time." Then she stared very hard at Barbara; saw that she was really, as she expressed it, bursting with great news; and forgot her slight disappointment in curiosity.

"Here comes the tea," she said. "Now I will ensconce myself in this arm-chair and you shall pour it out for me. After all, forty miles on the noble wheel does take it out of you, however manly and brave you may choose to be over it. Pour me out a nice cup, *chérie,* and then put that plate of cold meat on the little table by my side. Now is not this cozy? I am so glad you have dropped in, Barbara; it is quite a pleasure to have you to talk to; you are positive that you yourself won't have something to eat?"

"I am not hungry," said Barbara a little stiffly. She attended to Lucy's wants, and Lucy allowed herself to be waited on. She pushed her hand through her short, curling hair, her blue eyes grew bright, she

took off her pince-nez, and permitted herself, as she expressed it, to be comfortable; there were roses on her cheeks, and her well-knit frame spoke the perfection of physical health.

"I do wish I were a boy and that you were my page," she said.

"Thank you very much, but I don't know that I should care for the office," answered Barbara, who felt for some reason very much nettled with her friend.

"Oh, dear, dear Bab, don't you get cross, or what will the world come to? Now you want to confide in me, and of course I am all too anxious to hear what you have to say. Out with the news, little girl; believe me, I am all attention."

"I came here on purpose to consult you," said Barbara; she had poured out a second cup of tea, but forgot to hand it to her friend; she stood upright two or three feet away from Lucy, the color came and went on her cheeks, her eyes were bright with emotion. "It means everything to me," she continued, "and I have no one to consult but you. You will, I am sure, give me a perfectly unbiased opinion."

"You know my frankness," said Lucy.

"Yes, I know—I know. Lucy, there is a dreadful plan being proposed at home."

"Then you are poor?" said Lucy.

"You might perhaps think so; you are my friend, and I will tell you everything. Aunt Jane—yes, I must always call her that—has left in cash one thousand pounds between us four girls."

Lucy gave a little whistle.

"Why do you do that, Lucy? How rude of you!"

"I was only thinking of your magnificent fortune! Forgive me, my love. Do, please, proceed."

"That was all the money Aunt Jane had to leave us," said Barbara hotly. "Although I never professed to love her, there never was so just or so good a woman as Aunt Jane Motley."

"So it seems, when she has left you four girls to starve," said Lucy.

"You don't understand. She could not do more than leave us what she had got. A good deal of her income was derived from an annuity which ceased at her death. I don't exactly know what all that means, but Mr. Johnson explained it to Rosamond yesterday. Then some of her money had to go to her nephew, who is a barrister in London; but all the rest she left to us—the thousand pounds in cash and a farm in the country called The Gables."

"The Gables!" said Lucy. "Why, surely The Gables is not far from Ellenbergh; I have friends at Ellenbergh, and I know we often used to pass a tumble-down place called The Gables. Can it possibly be the same?"

"I expect so; I have not the least doubt that it is tumble-down and hideous."

"You don't seem enamored of your property, my dear; and I am sure I can scarcely wonder. Well, proceed. You have a thousand pounds between you, and The Gables. I presume you will live there?"

"Oh, Lucy, as if I could!" Barbara's face went first pale and then red. "You could not surely advise that?" she continued.

"Have I hit the nail on the head?" said Lucy calmly. "Is that the thought which provokes the poor little dear?"

"I do wish, Lucy, you would be earnest for once. You cannot imagine how important all this is to me."

"Well, I'll try to be as grave as possible. I really

am interested, but you must not forget that I have just ridden across country forty miles, and am dead with sleep and stiff in every bone, and also as hungry as a hawk. When I tell you that I refrain from eating because I hang on your words, and that I keep my eyes open, although I long beyond expression to close them, I surely give you sufficient proof that I am interested."

"I know you can give me excellent advice when you choose."

"Thank you for your good opinion, Barbara. I solemnly promise to do my best."

"Well, this is the state of affairs. Mr. Johnson says we cannot live on the income of a thousand pounds."

"Bless the child, I should think not. Why, it would not find me in hats and gloves."

"Then of course, Lucy, it cannot find us in food and clothes and lodging."

"But the lodging seems to me to be provided by The Gables. Even though it is a tumble-down, rack-rent sort of place, you will have a roof over your heads."

"Oh, Lucy, if you would let me speak! Aunt Jane left Rosamond a letter, to be delivered after her death. Rosamond has told us something of the contents to-day. Aunt Jane knew that we could not live on the income of the capital she left us, and she suggested—what do you think she suggested?—why this: that we four should go and live at The Gables and farm the land."

"Well?" said Lucy, sitting more upright and looking really interested at last.

"And Rosamond and Ursula and Clemency are actually full of the idea," continued Barbara. "Of

course," she added, speaking with great bitterness, "for me it is absolutely impossible."

"And why so? Do you know, Barbara, I think it is a capital thought; lady-farmers are quite the fashion now."

"What do I care about fashion? Oh, Lucy, don't you know me better? Don't you know what I hunger and thirst for beyond words?"

"Food, clothing, shelter," murmured Lucy, "all to be obtained by that excellent plan of the old lady's. What comes before those three essentials of life, after all, Barbara?"

"I thought you would understand, but you don't," answered Barbara. "Is there not intellectual food which some people pine for, which I, at least, cannot live without?"

"Frankly, my dear—and you have asked for my advice, so I must give it—frankly, I did not know you were quite such a goose."

"Then you positively advise me to consent to this odious plan?"

"I should like to know a great deal more about it before I attempt to tell you not to consent to it," said Lucy. She rose as she spoke, crossed the room, threw open the window, and gazed out into the night.

"How tired I am!" she said, simulating a great yawn.

"I see that you are in no humor to listen to me," said Barbara, starting up angrily and preparing to put on her hat.

"Well, Bab, I am sleepy; there is no vital necessity to decide anything to-night, is there? Come to me to-morrow, if you like, and we will talk the whole matter over."

"It will be arranged by to-morrow."

"Well, frankly, my opinion at the present moment is that you are a lucky girl. It strikes me that you might do much worse than resign yourself to the lady-farmer idea."

"I am very sorry I told you," said Barbara, backing toward the door.

"Now, my dear Bab, what is the good of being a friend if one is not frank? You asked me for my opinion. If I had concealed my true feelings, and had said, 'My dear Barbara, you are such a genius, you promise some day to be such a shining light, that it would be really madness for you to bury yourself in the country,' why, then you would have adored me, but because I think Rosamond's plan very sensible, you are annoyed."

"Oh, you are right to speak the truth," said Barbara, "and I would not mind so much if you had seemed really interested, but——"

"Blame that forty miles on the bicycle," said Lucy. "What can you expect of a poor human being who has undergone such fatigue?"

For answer Barbara held out her hand, which Lucy lightly clasped. The next moment the younger girl was in the street, hurrying home as fast as she could.

"Rosamond," she said to her sister before she went to bed that night, "I went to see Lucy Tregunter this evening, and I told her about your plan."

"I hope she won't repeat it, for nothing is settled yet," said Rosamond, looking vexed.

"I am sure she won't, she is not interested enough to do that. Anyhow, I felt I must consult someone, for I could not help feeling that you would not be on my side."

"If you really think that, Barbara, it is for the first time," said Rosamond, tears springing to her eyes.

"Oh, I know, darling!" said Barbara. "I feel through and through me that you are the best sister in the world, but there is a part of me which will be starved, which will die, if I go to live at The Gables."

"Well, sleep over it," said Rosamond. "I have written to Mr. Johnson, and he will call to see me to-morrow morning. Matters may seem much more feasible after you have slept over them."

Barbara went up to the attic, where Ursula and Clementcy were already in bed and fast asleep. She did not awake them, but neither did she attempt to undress. Her perplexities, her great unwillingness to lead what she called the vegetable life, were all her own. She felt quite certain that neither her sisters nor any of her friends would understand her. Must she be driven to take this odious step?

It was late when she got into bed, and then she cried herself to sleep.

The next morning Mr. Johnson called early, and after some talk with Rosamond, and some not unnatural surprise, began to see that the young girl's plan had germs of feasibility in it.

"Well," he said, "you astonish me very much, but the fact that Miss Motley suggested the idea speaks volumes in itself. Now I tell you what you must do. Just take the very next train into Ellenbergh,—The Gables is close to the station,—and go and see the house for yourself. After seeing the house, if you are still in favor of the experiment, I will introduce you to a friend of mine, an excellent farmer, who will give you the help of his experience. Of course, my advice to you would be to begin in a very small way at first."

"I will go to The Gables this very afternoon," said Rosamond, "and take my sisters with me."

"Do so, and let me know more about your plan to-morrow."

The lawyer went away, and Rosamond told the other girls what she had made up her mind to do. A train started for Ellenbergh at half-past one, and they would arrive at The Gables between two and three o'clock. They went on their little expedition, even Barbara in excellent spirits, caught their train, and quite early in the afternoon were wandering about the neglected farm, which Rosamond already saw in her mind's eye as their future home. It was a very tumble-down looking place, but as Clemency and Ursula found corners full of bluebells and primroses, as a babbling stream with forget-me-nots growing near its border flowed past the house, as the grass was green, and the trees already putting on their spring foliage, the two younger girls were wild with delight. Rosamond, more practical, eschewed the fascinations of the outdoor life, and began to investigate the house itself. This consisted of a long, low, rambling cottage, completely covered with different creepers. There was a porch over the front door, which opened direct into the dining-room. This low, somewhat dark apartment contained two tiny lattice windows, and thick wainscoted walls. The windows were nearly smothered in creepers, and the greater part of the light came from the door, which was divided in the middle after a very old-world fashion. Rosamond at once decided that when the bottom part of the door was shut, this little room would make a delightful dining-room for the hot days of summer. But in the winter, it would certainly be dark and gloomy. The dining-room led into a much more modern apartment, a long and very cheerful drawing-room; this room had wide French windows, which opened on a fair-sized lawn. This

might with care be turned into a croquet or even tennis lawn. Over the drawing-room was a room similar in size, which would make an excellent bedroom for the two younger girls, and behind this were three or four small very old-world rooms with the same tiny lattice windows which characterized the dining-room. These rooms had sloping roofs, and were rather dark; but already, early as the year was, the creepers pressed in at the windows, and Rosamond said afterward that a whiff of last year's roses seemed to linger about the place. She knew the birds' nests, as she called these tiny chambers, would be lovely in the summer.

All the furniture had been removed from the cottage, and the walls were dirty and needed whitewash and fresh paper.

"But it will cost very little to furnish it," thought Rosamond, "and surely, when we have made it bright and neat with light paper and paint, no more charming little house could possibly be found."

Outside there was a coach-house, and stabling for two horses; a fowl-house, a good deal out of repair, and a couple of stalls for cows; and also—last, but not least—a long, low, light, and quite modern room, which was evidently meant for a dairy.

"We shall do, we shall do famously," murmured Rosamond to herself. Already her head was full of plans. Already she saw the little place picturesque and neat as she felt she could make it. The flowers now choked with weeds in the garden at the back of the house should bloom gayly; the grass should be mown on the lawn; the fields should be dug and prepared for the fruitful grain; the fowl-house should be full of chickens; one or two cows should occupy their appointed stalls; a rough pony might be purchased to take his place in the stable, and a pony-cart in the

coach-house. Yes, all could be done, and done with very little outlay, and, oh! the delight of the fresh country breezes and the pleasurable anticipation of the happy farm life!

"The winter will be the worst," thought Rosamond. "In the winter the house will be dark and a little gloomy; but there must be some drawback to every scheme. Oh, yes! I am quite, quite in favor of the farm plan."

Meanwhile Barbara, who had taken a dislike to the house, and was not enamored of the basketfuls of wildflowers which Clementcy and Ursula were picking, had wandered away by herself.

"They will do it," she reflected as she walked; "we shall all come to live here immediately. In a month's time Rosamond will forget that there ever was a book written in the whole world. Ursula and Clementcy will grow up to be nothing better than farm girls, and I, if I consent to this scheme, will have to share a similar fate. Notwithstanding what Lucy said last night, I doubt if I shall consent."

She had just got to this point in her meditations when she came suddenly face to face with a tall girl who was seated on the top of a stile which led into a field. The girl had a comical, half-merry, half-pathetic face, and dancing dark-blue eyes, which looked as if they would burst into smiles on the smallest provocation. She was humming a gay air to herself, and switching the neighboring hedge with a small stick when Barbara appeared in view. On seeing her, the girl dropped her stick, sat bolt upright, and stared with all her might. The color flushed into her cheeks, and then receded, leaving her small, piquant face quite pale. Barbara also stared at her. She was undoubtedly a country girl,

but there was an air of frankness and good breeding about her which attracted Barbara immediately.

"Do you want to cross the stile?" said the girl, springing lightly to her feet as she spoke, "for if so——"

"Oh, you need not have got down," said Barbara. "I am not going anywhere in particular."

"I don't know your face," said the girl, speaking in an eager voice; "are you a stranger here?"

"Quite."

"How very interesting! Are you going to see anybody?"

"No, I was just taking a stroll; I have nothing special to do."

"And you are quite a stranger?" repeated the girl, springing back to her former perch, and beginning again to switch the hedge with her stick. "It is dull here sometimes; yes, it is very dull. If you really have nothing particular to do, would you mind jumping up on the stile and having a chat with me? I don't see girls who are strangers often—never, in fact. I should like very much to have a talk with you."

"My name is Barbara Underhill," said Barbara slowly, and pausing as she did so.

"Barbara Underhill; that is a very pretty name, and very uncommon. Mine is Hero Chevening. I was called after one of Shakspere's heroines. Do jump up on the stile; there is plenty of room for us both. I live in that big house just yonder; you can see it if you crane your neck. Do you come from London? You have not got the sort of air I should suppose an ordinary country girl to have."

"No, I don't come from London," answered Barbara. "We have lived up to the present at Charlton." Then she added impulsively, "I think I must tell you,

my sisters and I have some idea of coming to live at The Gables, that ugly little house just around the corner."

"That dear, fascinating, little house you mean," said the girl, "and you think of living there; how splendid for me! Have you plenty of room, Barbara —Miss Underhill, I mean; have I given you your fair share of the stile?"

"Yes, I have plenty of room, thank you," answered Barbara. She sat quite still, her hands lying idly in her lap; her companion interested her, but she was not specially inclined to talk.

"And I live in that big house," said Hero; "you can see it for yourself, if you take the trouble to look."

"What is it called?" asked Barbara.

"The Hall; it is a big place—dreadfully big."

"Then I suppose you are rich," said Barbara, knitting her brows.

"Rich? I assure you I am the poorest girl in the world."

Barbara looked round once more; she could see The Hall very distinctly; it was an old-fashioned pile, gray with age, and with a castellated roof. There were thick woods at the back, reaching far away towards the horizon; she could also catch a glimpse of flower gardens and well-kept, smoothly mown lawns.

"If you live at The Hall, you must be rich," she said in irritation; "that is, unless——"

"Unless what?" said the other girl, twinkling her merry eyes and looking as if she meant to burst into a peal of laughter the next moment.

"Unless you are a poor relation."

"I am not. Chevening Hall will belong to me some day."

"Then you talk nonsense, and you ought not to

humbug me," said Barbara, jumping off the stile and getting very red.

"Get up again, please, my dear Miss Hot-Temper," said the strange girl, catching hold of Barbara's hand as she spoke. "I like you because you are impulsive, and now I will tell you something about myself. In the whole of England there is not a poorer girl than I."

"You ought not to laugh at me, Miss Chevening."

"I assure you, Miss Underhill, that I am telling you the solemn truth; but now, before I say any more, are we to be friends or not?"

"It scarcely looks like it at the present moment," said Barbara, speaking very angrily.

"Yes, it does. I know the symptoms better than you do. You will cool down in a moment or two, and allow that I am speaking the truth. To begin with, please understand that I am not Miss Chevening to you, I am Hero; think of me as Shakspere's heroine, and you will find it impossible not to admire me. You, to me, are not Miss Underhill, but Barbara. I love the name of Barbara. I do so wish your surname was Allen; I admire the old ballad of 'Barbara Allen.' I should have acted just as she did. But now to proceed. I am poor, Barbara, because I have not got one of the things which make life rich."

"And yet you look merry enough," said Barbara; "of course, your dress"—here she glanced at a very shabby cotton frock which contained a large patch just above the hem.

"I tore it yesterday," said Hero, "and Mrs. Gunning—she is my governess; I detest her—insisted on my mending it to-day, so I put on this patch. She has not seen it yet; it is not even the same material, but what does that matter? Well, now I will tell you

how I am poor. I have no fine clothes—not that that matters: I don't care a fig for grand raiment—but I am poor because I am without friends and without the ordinary interests of life. I have not even a pet animal since Frisk, my Scotch terrier, died. I loved Frisk; he was caught in a trap meant for a fox." Here tears sprang suddenly to the girl's eyes. "He was cruelly injured, and they had to shoot him; I cannot bear to think of that day. When I know you better I will show you his grave. Every morning I put flowers there; I never neglect that. Frisk died, and I have had no companion since. I am not by right allowed to sit on this stile; but, all the same, I do it every day —that is, when Gunning's back is turned. I get enough to eat, although my food is very plain, and I have horrid, very old-fashioned lessons to learn. Would you believe it? I learn 'Magnall's Questions,' the most obsolete book in existence! Grannie used it when she was a girl. That is Gunning's style. Once a girl came to stay with me, a girl from London. She did me an immense amount of mischief—without meaning it, of course—and since then I have pined and pined for what I have not got. Before she came I did not know the things she spoke of existed. Of course, she asked me lots of questions, and I showed her my lesson books and talked to her, and then she lifted the curtain, and showed me what life really is. She told me about high schools, for instance, and colleges for women, and bicycles on which all the girls seem to ride now, and she explained about the rational dress, and the new woman, who is thought much more of now than man is. She said this is the Golden Age for women, and that I am far, far back in the mediæval times. Oh! how much she talked, and how she excited me, but she only stayed for two nights, and

then she went away. I have pined, as I said, ever since, for I have known that I am in prison. Often and often and often I long to break the bars of my cage."

"But why does all this happen?" asked Barbara, immensely interested at last.

"I cannot tell you, for I do not know myself. Grannie is the present owner of The Hall. I came here when I was four years old. I have only a dim remembrance of my life before then, but I have no doubt it was very much like the life of any other petted child. I do not see Grannie very often; she is not an invalid, but she likes to be quite alone. I have breakfast with Gunning, and dinner with Grannie and Gunning, and supper with Gunning, and I walk abroad, when I do walk abroad, with Gunning, and I never exchange ideas expect with that worthy and interesting creature. She talks 'Magnall's Questions' when we are out, and 'papa, potatoes, prunes, and prism' when we are at our meals. Once she made valiant efforts to get me to converse in the French tongue, but I stuck at that. Whenever she sees me with a modern book she takes it away. Once I fought my way into the library (there is a splendid library at The Hall, and lots of books), and Gunning told Grannie, and Grannie locked the door, and I have not been in since. My private library consists of the 'Fairchild Family,' 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and the 'Daisy Chain.' I read these three books by turns, and I know them pretty well by heart now. This morning I read about Giant Despair in 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and it was so precious dull with him that I ran off and came to my dear stile. Here I sit and watch the world. As a rule, the world is not exciting from my stile. Farmers go by very slowly, cracking their whips and

'geeupping' their horses. Once I saw a young man with a fishing-rod; he had blue eyes and fair, curling hair. He stared very hard at me, and I stared back. I wondered just for a moment if he could really be Prince Narcissus, and if he were going to rescue Princess Potentilla. You know I often think of myself as Princess Potentilla, but I saw at a glance that he did not look strong enough, so I just switched the hedge and whistled; I can whistle, and it relieves my feelings, and he went by, and I have not seen him since. To-day you came; I never saw any one like you before. My heart beat when you walked up the road. Now are we to be friends or not?"

"I should like very much indeed to be your friend," said Barbara.

"That is right, Barbara. That is delightful. Now, please, say slowly after me, 'I am going to be your friend, Hero Chevening.'"

"'I am going to be your friend, Hero Chevening,'" repeated Barbara, feeling fascinated.

Hero held out a small, beautifully tapered hand, which Barbara clasped in her strong, over-big fingers.

"And you are to live at The Gables?" asked Hero.

"For a short time, perhaps, I must," answered Barbara.

"Oh, pray, don't speak of it in that tone. Think how delightful it will be for me."

"You will make a difference, certainly," replied Barbara.

"I shall see you every day," continued Hero. "Every day I will come and sit on the stile when Gunning is having her nap. She naps for two full hours every day; but for that fact I should have gone mad long ago. While she is asleep I will take you to The Hall and show you the queer old rooms. To a

stranger it would appear probably a lovely place, only I am deadly tired of it; and you shall come to my bedroom and see my dear library, my 'Daisy Chain,' my 'Pilgrim's Progress,' and my 'Fairchild Family.' Barbara, don't you hate the 'Fairchild Family'? Were there ever such prigs as those two girls, and that boy, and then the awful parents! I often compare Mrs. Gunning to Mr. and Mrs. Fairchild, and John and Betty, the two servants, all rolled together. She is the essence of prim decorum and severity. Now, don't you understand what I mean when I say that I am poor?"

"I think I do, and I am sorry for you," said Barbara. "While I am at The Gables I shall like to think that I am near you, and that you will be my friend."

"I have not the least doubt that I shall love you in the end better even than I loved dear Frisk," said Hero.

Barbara jumped down from the stile.

"I must be going now," she said. "It is nearly time for us to catch our train."

"Did you say that you had sisters?"

"Three."

"How delightful! And shall I get to know you all?"

"I suppose so, Hero. I hope you will come often to see us at The Gables."

"You may be quite sure I will. Must you really go now? Do you know, it is just like parting with a ray of light, with a gleam of the spring."

"How poetical you are," said Barbara, smiling with the utmost frankness and pleasure.

"Am I? I think I have got a lot of poetry in me

somewhere. By the way, why does your pocket bulge so?"

"Because I have got a book in it—one of Tennyson's."

"Tennyson? Who is he?"

"Hero, you don't mean to tell me that you don't know Tennyson!"

"Not I. I never heard his name before."

"He is dead now," said Barbara; "but when he was alive he was quite the greatest poet of the century."

"Of this century?"

"Yes; this century."

"And that book?"

"It is called 'Enoch Arden.' I am learning it by heart. I was to have recited part of it at the high school; but now all that sort of thing is at an end. The poem is very pretty; I have read it dozens of times."

"I suppose," said Hero, coloring—"perhaps it is too much to ask—but if you could bring yourself to lend the book to me?"

"Lend it you? Of course I will."

"How very kind and delicious of you! Already I am loving you better than Frisk. You don't know what a real treat it will be. You shall have it safely back when you come to The Gables. By the way, when do you come?"

"I don't quite know; perhaps not for some weeks yet," answered Barbara, frowning as the thought of her trouble returned to her.

"Well, I shall come to the stile every day until I see you again. Good-by, Barbara. Good-by, my dear, nice peep-of-the-world, my gleam of the spring."

Barbara laughed, kissed her hand to Hero, and ran quickly back to the cottage.

CHAPTER VII

STOLEN VISITS

"I SHALL get up very early to-morrow morning," said Clementcy.

The time of year was June; the days were at their longest; the weather was perfect, with a lazy sort of feeling about it. In the middle of the day the birds were silent, only the bees continued to hum and the gnats kept up a tuneful little sighing movement as they flew backward and forward under the thick trees.

The four Underhill girls were all seated on the tiny lawn in front of the little drawing-room at The Gables. Clementcy had ensconced herself on the grass, with her legs tucked comfortably under her. Ursula was in a hammock, which she had fastened to the low bough of a tree which stood not far away; Rosamond was leaning back in a deck-chair, and Barbara, with her knees nearly hitched up to her ears, was devouring an ancient copy of "Don Quixote." Barbara's cheeks were flushed and her eyes wore their usual half-comical, half-rebellious expression. The other three girls looked contented, healthy, and very happy.

"I shall get up quite early to-morrow," repeated Clementcy; "about four."

"How absurd!" cried Barbara—she flung her book, face downwards, on the grass. "What will not a farm

girl do! Why must you leave your bed at that unearthly, heathenish hour, Clementcy?"

"Because just about then the first batch of chickens will be hatched," was the earnest reply.

Barbara gave a snort of indignation.

"The idea of losing several hours of slumber for the sake of chickens," she said after a pause.

"I would do a great deal more than that," replied Clementcy, "to see the first chick crack its egg and come out. I never saw chickens come out of their eggs before, and Betty says the time will be up tomorrow morning. Rose, darling, you don't mind my getting up to see the chicks, do you?"

"No, Clementcy, just for once—that is, if you promise faithfully to go back to bed again after you have seen them."

"But I sha'n't want to do that, the time will be so lovely in the early morning with the dew on the flowers."

"And Clementcy will be pale and good for nothing in the evening," retorted Rosamond. "Look here, we will make a bargain. If you get up, you must promise to go straight back to bed again. I too want to see the chicks come out of their eggs, so I will wake you at four, and we will both go down to the henhouse and see the sight."

"That will be heavenly!" said Clementcy.

"You may as well wake me too," cried Ursula. "Oh!" she continued, "how I do love this farm life! how sweet everything looks! Rosamond, you have never told us yet how much it cost to furnish this cottage."

"Exactly fifty pounds," said Rosamond; "and I do think," she added, "we managed well—don't you, Barbara?"

"Managed well, how?" asked Barbara, who had returned once more to her book. "Oh, about the furnishing," she added; "yes, I suppose it is all right."

Rosamond gave utterance to a very slight sigh and then, rising from her comfortable chair, she went slowly into the house.

It would have been difficult now for anyone who had seen that same house three months ago to recognize it. All Rosamond Underhill's latent power had come out in the arranging of the little cottage. The low, old-fashioned drawing-room with its polished floor looked as fresh, as sweet, in short, as like the ideal "love in a cottage" as such a room could possibly appear. The wide bay window was draped in book muslin. Roses, clematis, myrtle, peeped in at the open doors. A great old china bowl occupied the central position of an old-fashioned table, and was filled up to the brim with roses. A table prepared for afternoon tea stood in one corner of the room, and just at this moment Sarah, who had cast in her lot with the girls, appeared bearing a kettle and a teapot.

"The afternoon is so fine that we would like to have tea on the lawn, Sarah," said Rosamond.

Sarah put down her kettle and teapot and lifted the little table on to the grass plot without a word.

"I have made some hot cakes, miss," she said then, "and of course you will have cream, and would the young ladies like fresh eggs?"

"Not to-day, thank you," replied Rosamond. "We are only expecting Miss Chevening to tea; no one else is coming."

"Well, I have got a nice basket of fresh strawberries," continued Sarah. "You shall have strawberries and cream—after all, nothing could be better."

"Certainly not," replied Rosamond, "but do not for-

get, Sarah, that this is our last week of plenty of cream; when the new churn comes, and the new cow, we must begin the butter-making in earnest."

"Yes, miss—the new churn will be down to-night, and also the machine for separating the cream from the milk."

"How I am longing for next week!" said Rosamond enthusiastically. "I feel as if our real farm life will begin then."

"Well," said Sarah, "I may as well own that the whole thing is very interesting. I know perfectly well that you will sell the best butter and the freshest eggs in all the countryside."

"And you are with me heart and soul, are you not?" said Rosamond, turning affectionately to the maid.

"I am that, miss. I always took to you, Miss Rosamond, ever since the day——"

"Oh, yes, I know!" interrupted Rosamond; "and you remember our bargain," she added: "you are to have a certain share of the profits."

"I don't forget it, Miss Rosamond, but I'm not specially thinking of that just now. I may as well own that I am proud to serve you. I loved you from the moment you took Miss Clemency in your arms, and carried her into my dear mistress's presence. I have cast in my lot with you, miss, and the other young ladies. It seems to me there is only one crook in the whole thing, and that is——"

Rosamond did not speak; her eyes suddenly fell.

"And you share the thought with me, miss," continued the maid. "The one crook in the lot is Miss Barbara; why she don't like it, I can't say, but like it she never will."

"Well, never mind about her now," interrupted

Rosamond. "Tell the young ladies, please, Sarah, that I will be with them on the lawn in five minutes."

She left the pretty little drawing-room and, passing through the queer, very cool dining-room beyond, ran upstairs to her own room. Everywhere all over the old-fashioned house there was peace and order. Rosamond's room can only be described as a bird's nest. It might be dark and dreary in winter, but now, in the height of summer, no little nest could be more charming. The scent from hundreds of wildflowers was wafted in through the open window—clematis, sweet-brier, Virginia creeper, all encircled its open frame. Rosamond's bird in its gilded cage was hanging outside and piping lustily. Rosamond flung herself on her knees by the window, rested her elbows on the sill, and looked out with a dreamy sensation of perfect peace and happiness in her heart.

"I am about the luckiest girl in the world," she reflected; "the farm is not only delightful, but I think it will pay. By and by, when I have saved a little money, I may be able to give Barbara and Ursula and Clemency some of the advantages of a more all-around education. As to myself, I am more than content to be just a woman farmer all my days—but the others! I should like them to have the best of everything; Barbara in particular. Oh, if Bab would only be content to stay on here, I should not have a sorrow in my lot!"

She sighed. At that moment the creaking noise of the little wicket gate being opened arrested her attention. She poked her head out of the window, and saw Hero coming up the path. She walked quickly, as was her wont; her short cotton frock was as shabby as ever, she wore an old sailor-hat pushed far back on her curly head, her dress was too small for her, and

her whole get-up was bizarre in the extreme; but nothing could take the life and charm from her beautiful face.

"Poor child!" thought Rosamond; "how badly treated she is at home, and how much she enjoys coming here! I am more obliged to Hero than I can describe, for I think if anyone will make Barbara contented with The Gables she is the one. Only here, too," she added, "there is a tiny trouble, for Hero's are stolen visits."

She ran downstairs, smoothing out as she did so her fair curling hair, and straightening her cotton frock until it was the perfection of neatness. As she passed through the drawing-room she pulled a rose from amongst the cluster which grew round the window, and fastened it into the belt of her dress. When she stepped out on the lawn she made a perfect picture of sweet young English girlhood.

Barbara had now forgotten all about her book, which was flung, face downwards, at a little distance on the grass plot. She was talking to Hero, who, standing up, was gesticulating with her usual freedom of action.

"Oh, is that you, Rosamond?" Hero cried, running up to the elder girl and kissing her first on one cheek and then on the other. "I am so glad to see you, but I have come to say that in all probability this is the very last time I shall have tea with you. Oh, how delicious everything looks! I smell the strawberries from here."

"But you have lots of strawberries at The Hall," said Rosamond.

"How can you compare them? Could you eat strawberries with 'Prunes and Prism' sitting opposite you? Could you enjoy fresh fruit when each moment

the only subjects of conversation are reproaches flung at you? 'My dear Hero, how awkward!' 'Excuse me, Hero, I really cannot permit this conduct.' 'Hero, it is unladylike to eat fruit so quickly.' Oh, Rosamond, you know the style—you must know it—and it goes on forever, and ever, and ever."

"It must be trying, I admit," said Rosamond, "but what about coming here again? I wish you would sit down, Hero," she continued; "you will find that deck-chair most comfortable."

"Thanks, but I am too excited to sit. It was this morning the storm broke. Mrs. Gunning missed me yesterday and asked me where I had been. I told her such a nice whopper, and I thought at the time she believed me."

"What is a whopper?" interrupted Clementcy.

"Oh, Hero! you ought not," said Rosamond, shaking her head.

"That is no proper way of getting out of your difficulties," said Barbara, in a stout and somewhat cross voice.

"Isn't it? How you all do round on me! Well, all I can say is this: if you were in my shoes, you would be reduced to the necessity of telling whoppers, too. Gunning asked me how I spent all my spare time—she means the time while she naps every day, and I told her——"

"What?" asked Ursula.

"Well, I said I went to Frisk's grave and arranged fresh flowers and cried over my dog."

Rosamond looked grave, but Clementcy began to laugh.

"The fact is this," continued Hero; "Mrs. Gunning thinks that the be-all and end-all of a woman's life is to do fine needlework—'plain sewing' is what

she calls it. She always gives me a seam to sew, or a great, long, tiresome, interminable, turned-down hem to finish when she goes for her nap. She expects the work to be done when she returns. Now of late the work has not been done. I have found The Gables much more interesting than the long, straight seam or the turned-down hem, so I come here every day, and Gunning begins to suspect the truth."

"What does she say? Do tell us all about it," said Barbara.

Hero was now sufficiently calm to condescend to fling herself into the deck-chair.

"How comfortable you are here!" she said. "I breathe here; this to me is the world. What a delicious place to live in! Oh, dear, I sometimes feel as if I could drown myself when I think of the useless miseries to which Gunning subjects me."

"But your story," said Rosamond in her gentle voice.

As she spoke she approached the neatly arranged tea-table and began to pour out cups of fragrant tea. Cream was added, and Clemency began to hand round the cups. Then the little girl fetched some tiny tables from the drawing-room, and each girl helped herself to strawberries, to which she added cream.

"Now, while you prepare your strawberries, do speak," said Barbara.

"Well," said Hero, "a sort of climax came this morning. I went through my lessons as usual. I had finished my odious task out of 'Magnall's Questions,' and had repeated a French verb, and then I played one or two of my pieces, 'Les Cloches du Monastère' and 'La Prière d'une Vierge,' and a thing by a man called Brinley Richards; I think it is called

'I Stood on the Bridge at Midnight.' You know the poem, of course. There is a tune, and then a lot of variations, oh, so commonplace! I thought I was playing rather better than usual, but Gunning evi dently did not agree with me; she stopped me suddenly by slapping my fingers quite fiercely with a little ruler she held in her hand, and then said, 'Hero, I must out with the truth; I suspect you.'

" 'You are always suspecting me, Mrs. Gunning,' I answered; 'there is nothing fresh in that.'

" 'You are capable of downright deceit,' said Mrs. Gunning. 'I may as well say also that I have discovered you.'

"I tried to raise my eyebrows and to pull down the corners of my mouth, but, for all that, I began to feel slightly uneasy. There was no use showing it to Gunning, however, so I crossed my hands demurely on my lap and said:

" 'Of what sin am I guilty?'

"Oh, how angry she got! She could not speak for a moment, then she burst out with the thought that was torturing her.

" 'What do you do when I am in my room every afternoon? During the short time I give myself for reading and study, how do you spend your time?'

"Oh, how I stared at her! Old humbug! mu h reading and studying she does—she simply throws herself on her bed and snores for two hours. But when I saw that she told a big whopper I thought I'd tell one too, so I said:

" 'You know the grief I have lately undergone?'

" 'I certainly do not,' she replied. 'It seems to me that if there is a girl in the wide world who has no trouble at all, you are the one, Hero Chevening.'

" 'There are some sorrows too sacred for words,' I

answered, 'and mine is one. I allude to the death of my faithful dog, Frisk.'

"'Oh, don't talk folly to me,' said Mrs. Gunning. 'Answer my question immediately: what do you do during the two hours that I am in my room?'

"'I go to visit Frisk's grave,' I answered; 'I put fresh flowers over it. Then I sit on the mound and think of my blessed one, no longer worried by the cats, no longer submitted to the indignity of being turned out of the drawing-room on cold nights.'

"'Hero, Hero,' said Mrs. Gunning, 'if only your grandmother could hear you!'

"'I don't mind in the least whether Grannie hears me or not,' I answered.

"She went quite pink when I said that, particularly in the tip of her nose. Then after a pause she continued:

"'I have found you out. I did not examine your needlework for some weeks, being quite assured that you were doing your appointed task. Yesterday I went into the schoolroom and took up the work-basket. To my horror I discovered that nothing whatever had been done. Not a stitch had been put in the tablecloths and sheets which I gave you to hem since the last time I examined them. That, Hero, is exactly three weeks ago. If you spend the time that you ought to give to needlework at your dog's grave, you do very wrong, and I must forbid it, but I fear your conduct is much worse than that.'

"'Oh, believe what you like,' I said, and then I jumped up and ran out of the schoolroom before she could catch me. The dinner-bell rang almost immediately, and we went down to dinner. Grannie was there as usual. You know, of course, that we always dine with Grannie. She looks so sleepy while she is

having her dinner, and hardly ever makes a remark, and she certainly made none to-day, though Mrs. Gunning asked her, in her odiously affectionate way, how she felt. When dinner was over Gunning came straight up to me, took my arm, and marched me back to the schoolroom. Then she said, 'Here is your seam, which you are to sew from one end to the other; it is a long seam, quite three yards in length, and it will take all your time. Your dog's grave has to be neglected to-day!' Then she marched out of the room, turned the key in the lock, and slipped it into her pocket.

"Poor old Gunning! she little knows Hero Chevening. I waited for a bit until I heard the lock of her own room turn, and then I slipped out of the window and let myself down to the ground by means of the wistaria which covers all that part of the house. Well, girls, and here I am. Of course, it is extremely likely to be the last time, but as I am here do let us be as jolly as possible. Clementcy, come and sit on my knee?"

"I will with pleasure, Hero," replied Clementcy. "Do you know," she added, as she ensconced herself comfortably with one arm round Hero's neck, "that we are going to have a lot of little chicks out to-morrow morning. I shall call one of them after you, Hero, if you like."

"What a delightful compliment," said Barbara.

"I think it a great compliment," said Hero brightly. "I shall love you to do it, Clementcy. Be sure you call the stoutest and the most valiant of the chicks after me. I hope it may thrive, for if it thrives, I shall thrive."

Clementcy put her other arm round Hero's neck and pressed her soft lips to Hero's velvet cheeks, and

Hero lay back in her deck-chair, and the reckless expression left her face.

"The life she leads is dreadful for her," thought Rosamond. "Why should she not be allowed to go about with other girls—why should she not have a little real pleasure? There must be a mystery somewhere. I do wish I knew that old grandmother."

Meanwhile tea proceeded merrily. The strawberries soon disappeared, the hot cakes and toast also vanished—the teapot was drained dry, and no cream was left in the cream jug. The girls got lazily out of their different seats, and as the sun was now sinking toward the west, Rosamond proposed that they should have a game of tennis.

Hero had never even seen tennis until she came to know the Underhill girls. She was excited about it, as most beginners are, and was all too eager to join. The net was arranged, and the girls were just beginning their game when the little wicket gate was suddenly opened, and an elderly, stout, cross-looking lady was seen walking up the path.

"Gunning, as I am alive!" cried Hero; her rosy face turned visibly paler. "I cannot face her," she said, turning to Rosamond; "she would be too insulting before you all. Where shall I hide?"

"Come with me; we'll go to the fowl-house," said Clementcy.

Hero and Clementcy vanished like a flash of lightning.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Gunning had been shown by the sedate Sarah into the pretty little drawing-room. From there she had an excellent view of the lawn, with the tennis net arranged and the girls apparently busy with their game. She peered out eagerly—she had hoped to see Hero in their midst—she had hoped

to bring Hero to open shame, but there was no sign whatever of her pupil.

Rosamond entered the room.

"You are Miss Underhill, I think?" said Mrs. Gunning, rising as she spoke. "You must pray excuse my calling; I have come to speak to you on an important matter."

"My name is Rosamond Underhill," replied Rosamond.

Mrs. Gunning stared at Rosamond from the top of her neat head to her pretty little shoes.

"I am told that you farm this place," she said. "Can it be true?"

"It is perfectly true. I am sorry tea is just over, but I can get you a fresh cup immediately, if you like."

"No, thank you, I have not come to tea. Miss Underhill, I have called to ask you a straight question."

"What is that?" asked Rosamond.

"Has my pupil, Hero Chevening, been here this afternoon?"

Rosamond colored, then after a moment's hesitation, she said gently:

"Hero comes here sometimes; she has been here to-day."

Mrs. Gunning stood up; her face became a vivid scarlet.

"I thought as much," she cried with passion, "and you tell me so coolly too. What would her grandmother say, if she knew? Was there ever such a wicked, deceitful girl! I shall punish her well for this. She shall be locked in her bedroom, and have nothing but bread and water for a week. Pray tell me where she is now."

"I will fetch her, if you will wait a moment," said Rosamond; "but I am puzzled to know," she added, pausing and looking very directly at the angry lady, "what harm comes to Hero by associating with my sisters and myself? Although we do farm this place, we are ladies—we are not likely to do Hero any harm."

"That is not the question; she comes without leave. She is never to come here again; have the goodness to fetch her immediately."

Rosamond left the room—her heart was beating with indignation. In the dining-room she met Barbara.

"What are you going to do, Rosamond?" asked Barbara.

"There is nothing whatever for me to do, Barbara, but to fetch poor Hero; Mrs. Gunning has come for her, and I had to tell her she was here."

"Then you betrayed her—how horrid of you, Rose!"

"I could not tell a lie, Barbara; you know that perfectly well."

"And now you intend to bring Hero to Mrs. Gunning?"

"I am obliged—there is no help for it."

"You can save yourself the trouble. Go back to the delightful woman, and tell her that Hero is no longer here."

"But she was a few minutes ago."

"You don't suppose she would wait to go home with Gunning? She has returned to The Hall. Oh, dear; poor Hero! I don't think I can quite stand the thought of the treatment that dreadful Gunning will subject her to. Just stay in this room for a moment or two, until I——"

"Until you what, Barbara?"

"Until I follow Hero. I shall go to her to The Hall. I love her better every day, and I am determined to help her. You cannot keep me, Rosamond —I am going."

Barbara snatched up her hat and rushed away. Rosamond waited for a moment, with a look of perplexity on her face, then she returned to Mrs. Gunning.

"Hero was here," she said, "but I cannot find her now. I believe she has returned to The Hall."

"She feared that I should catch her—just like her, the little coward," said Mrs. Gunning. "Well, Miss Underhill, I will wish you good-afternoon; I must follow my refractory pupil immediately. Please clearly understand that if she comes here again, she does so as a direct act of disobedience; if you receive her, and encourage her, you do so at your own risk. What Hero's grandmother will say when I tell her what has occurred I have no words to describe."

CHAPTER VIII

THE NEST BEHIND THE HAYSTACK

Meanwhile Barbara was running as fast as her feet would carry her over the dusty road. She soon reached the stile where she had seen Hero on the first day of her visit to The Gables. She mounted it and ran down a shady walk under some overhanging elms; this walk presently brought her to another turnstile, which led into a wood. A few moments later Barbara found herself in the grounds of The Hall itself. She stood still and looked around her. There was not a soul in sight. It was just the quietest hour of the twenty-four; the birds were resting from their song, the squirrels and rabbits were sleeping after their mid-day meal, even the gnats had almost ceased to hum.

"If only I could find out where she has gone," she thought to herself. "I love her too much to hand her over to the tender mercies of that dreadful old Gunning. Dear Hero! what a splendid girl she might be, if only she had the smallest opportunity. Why should she be made a prisoner in this place? Of course, it is a beautiful place, but Hero does not lead a beautiful life. Can there be anything more innocent than her visits to us? Why is it wrong for her to come?"

At this moment there came a very low whistle, it almost seemed to sound in Barbara's ear. She turned

abruptly. A little summer-house, which she had not before observed, stood just at the entrance to the wood. Barbara ran to it, peeped in, and saw Hero leaning up against the rustic wall.

"I thought it was you, Bab," she said. "Why have you followed me? You will only get yourself into fresh trouble."

"I shall share your trouble," answered Barbara, "and that will be a comfort."

Hero was not the sort of a girl who ever gave way to tears, but at this moment her blue eyes grew soft, her red lips trembled, and she put one of her small, shapely hands on Barbara's arm.

"I know a hiding-place," she said in a low whisper, "which even Gunning has not discovered. Let us make for it at once and talk things over."

"That is what I have come to do," said Barbara.

"Follow me then, and do not speak a word."

Hero took one of Barbara's hands, and the girls left the shelter of the little wood. They had to cross an open field, and then to hurry down a neglected side-path. After five minutes' quick running they found themselves in Hero's shelter. It was nothing more nor less than a nest which she had dug out for herself at the back of one of last year's haystacks.

"My dear little shelter won't last long," she said disconsolately. "The horses will soon eat it all up. It gets thinner every day; but no one as yet has thought of coming round to the back of the stack, and, until someone does, I feel safe from annoyance here. See, Bab, I have quite fitted up my little nest. Here is a shelf where I put the precious books you lend me. Sometimes the mice come out, and there are two rats with whom I have become quite on friendly terms. I call them Rap and Snap, and I feed them with crumbs

from my pocket. They won't venture out this afternoon, because you are here. Now let us nestle cosily down and have a good talk."

"I am glad you have a shelter like this," said Barbara. "If I had known about it before, I could have come to see you, and you need not have come to us so often."

"But it is much more refreshing and a greater change for me to come to see you. You don't suppose I intend to stop away just because Gunning found me out to-day?"

"Of course, Hero, *I* should be delighted to see you," answered Barbara; "but then Rosamond is dreadfully particular. She is always thinking of what is right and what is wrong. She won't think it right to receive you if Mrs. Gunning disapproves."

Hero gave vent to an impatient exclamation.

"Once for all," she said, "I will not promise to obey Gunning. It is war to the knife between us. The fact is," she continued, "I don't think I can stand the life much longer. Before I met you I did make a sort of effort to be contented; but now—now that I know what the world really is——"

"But you have not met the world at our house, poor Hero!"

"No! Don't you think so? It seems like it to me."

"It just shows how little you know. You could not call our strawberry parties, and just the society of Rosamond, and Ursula, and Clementcy, and myself the world. Even the high school which I used to attend at Charlton taught me better than that. Oh, Hero, darling, there is a great lovely world somewhere, and girls like you—girls with beautiful faces—are not persecuted in it. They are petted and made

much of. Oh! I have read about it, and have longed to join it. In the real world there are tennis parties, and dances, and river parties, and fun of all sorts, and then some day someone like the Prince comes along."

"Yes, I think about him," said Hero, her eyes growing dark and thoughtful. "He is my last and only chance; but I am only fifteen. The Prince won't worry about me for many a long day."

"You will have to get out of your prison somehow," said Barbara. "He is sure to come for you some day because you are so beautiful. For my part, I don't wish for him. I do not intend ever to marry. I mean to——"

"What, Bab!" said Hero. She bent forward and looked eagerly into her little companion's face. "What do you mean to do?"

"Perhaps—I am not sure," said Barbara, her eyes kindling—"perhaps to write books, even poetry perhaps, but prose certainly, or books of travel. Anyhow, I mean to write a book which will live—which people will talk about. There will be reviews in the papers—criticisms they call them—and some of them will cut me up, and others will praise me, and the book will sell, and sell, and sell, and money will pour in, and people will look at me when I enter a room, or when I drive out in the Park. They will say something like this, 'See, that is the girl who wrote "Disenchantment," ' or whatever name I may call my book. Hero, that is my dream of dreams, and now I have told it to you. To be successful—greatly successful in one clever thing—to be spoken about, to wear a sort of invisible crown—that is what I want. I don't care about any Prince. I'll leave him to you."

"How queerly you talk!" said Hero, laughing. "It

is delightful to listen to you. Now let me think. If Rosamond won't allow me to come to The Gables again, we must contrive some plan by which we can meet. Don't talk to me for a moment, let me think hard."

Hero pressed both her hands to her hot cheeks. After a time she looked up.

"Are you good at climbing?" she asked.

"Climbing! What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. There is an attic, a large attic, which is over my bedroom. No one ever goes there because it is said to be haunted. If you could manage to climb up, and I think I could help you, we could meet there whenever we liked."

"But how could you help me?"

"Would you be afraid of a ladder of ropes?"

"A ladder of ropes! Hero, you are quite mediæval; what do you mean?"

"I know how to make one; and I could slip it down from the window the last thing at night, and fasten it, of course, very securely to the window ledge. Then you might climb up. The really great danger would be in going down again, but, after all, and for the sake of friendship, the thing might be managed. There is a great big arm of wistaria which climbs all over that part of the house, and you can cling on to the wistaria while you are coming up the ladder. When you get to the top we would pull the ladder up. If any noise was heard, people would say the ghost was walking again."

"We will make her walk," said Barbara, her eyes sparkling; "what fun the whole thing sounds! I declare, Hero, you are turning me into a naughty, mischievous schoolgirl."

"All the better for you, my love," answered Hero.

"And now perhaps you had better go. If I have to meet the storm of Gunning's anger, I must get it over as quickly as possible. If you come here to-morrow night I will have the ladder of ropes ready, and will wait for you in the attic."

"At what hour shall I come?"

"Do not be earlier than ten o'clock. If you are under the window at ten everything will be ready. Gunning always goes to bed early."

"And we go to bed early, too," answered Barbara; "Rosamond is very particular on that point. I shall have to deceive her if I come to you."

"Well, you must manage that as you please. The ladder of ropes shall be waiting, and I will expect you."

When Barbara reached home she found Rosamond in a great state of excitement.

"Well, Barbara," she said eagerly, "did you find Hero?"

"I did, and I have had a talk with her."

"I hope you told her that she must not come here any more."

"I told her that I feared you would not allow her to come, Rosamond; I think it is awfully hard on her."

"It is hard, I admit," said Rosamond; "but what is to be done? Barbara, I cannot get her out of my head, and do you know, I have formed a daring idea."

"You have formed a daring idea?" said Barbara.

"Yes, little as you think that I could do so; I have made up my mind to beard the lioness in her den."

"What lioness?"

"Why, old Mrs. Chevening herself."

"You don't mean it!"

"I do."

"Well, then, you may just as well spare yourself the trouble. Everyone says that nothing will induce Mrs. Chevening to see strangers. Even Hero only spends half an hour every day at dinner with her grandmother. Mrs. Chevening seems to be in bad health, or to be very odd, or something or other, and Hero is afraid of her. How do you think it possible, Rosamond, that you, a stranger, can have an interview with her?"

"I can but try," answered Rosamond. "I sincerely pity Hero, and there seems to me to be no other way of helping her."

"Do you intend to go by yourself?"

"Yes, that would be best."

"Well, all I can say is, you are very plucky. I really don't think I'd have nerve enough. When are you going?"

"This evening; at once, in fact: there is no time for delay. I pity Hero. If Hero is left to the tender mercies of Mrs. Gunning she will be ruined. I don't think it right to allow her to come here against the wishes of her grandmother and governess, but at the same time our society would do her a great deal of good. My idea is that if I can see Mrs. Chevening I may be able to persuade her that such is the case. She may give Hero permission to spend a part of every day with us, and then I think our cause will be won."

"It certainly would be splendid," said Barbara; "but I, for my part, have very little hope."

"You are very fond of Hero, are you not, Bab?"

"I love her," answered Barbara.

"Well, you know, Bab, it is not real love to help her to be deceitful. At present things seem to me to be quite wrong. I do not know of any possible way

of putting things right except by seeing Mrs. Chevening."

"You can but try," said Barbara, "only of course I don't suppose you'll succeed for a moment."

Rosamond said nothing further; she went into the dairy to superintend the setting of the night's supply of milk, and Barbara ran off to her own room.

She and Rosamond, as the two elder girls, each possessed a bird's nest to sleep in. Barbara's bird's nest had no entrance except through Rosamond's tiny bedroom. The two younger girls occupied the long, low, modern room which had been built over the drawing-room. Barbara now went into her own bird's nest, shut and locked the door, opened the window, flung herself on her knees, and looked out. From here she could get a distant view of The Hall with its turreted roofs, its stately pile of building, and its thick woods at the back.

"Why should there be such a beautiful place and a girl so miserable in it?" she reflected. "The more I think over matters the more I am certain that I am the only one who can really liberate poor Hero. As to Rosamond's idea of seeing Mrs. Chevening, that is simply nonsense. Dear Rosamond, she is the best girl in the world, but so painfully, painfully matter-of-fact."

CHAPTER IX

BEARDING THE LIONESS

When Rosamond had concluded her work in the dairy, she ran upstairs, put on her neat black Sunday hat, a black scarf and gloves, and taking up her parasol went out. Just at the little rustic gate she met her two younger sisters.

"Are you going for a walk? Do let us come with you," they both cried.

"Not to-night," she answered, "I want to be alone to-night."

"What for; is it anything special?" asked Clementcy.

"It is something very special, Clem; I want to get a poor little prisoner outside her prison bars."

"Oh, then I know. How delighted I am; you are going to do what you can for dear Hero."

"Yes, what I can."

"You will bring her back with you?"

"Not to-night, but I hope she may come sometimes. I may fail in my undertaking, but I am going to try to do my best."

Ursula raised her rosebud lips to kiss her sister, and Clementcy gave Rosamond a hearty hug.

"Go to bed now, both of you," said Rosamond. "You know you are going to be up early to-morrow."

"Oh, those chicks! I sha'n't sleep a wink," said the

youngest girl. She danced down the little walk, and Rosamond turned quickly in the direction of the dusty highroad.

She walked for nearly half a mile, and then she came to the lodge gates. She had never before ventured inside the grounds of The Hall. A woman at the lodge ran out to open the gate, and stared very hard at her as she went in.

"It is nearly a mile to the house, miss," she said; "I don't know if you are going there."

"I am," said Rosamond; "I want to see Mrs. Chevening."

"It is only right to tell you, miss, that Mrs. Chevening never sees visitors."

"She may see me; at any rate I am going to try."

The woman gave her a look which was partly wistful and partly curious.

"It is such as you that our poor young lady should have as a friend," she remarked to Rosamond, "but there's no getting around Mrs. Chevening; she has her own ideas, and no one living can change her."

Rosamond made no reply to this, but began to walk quickly up the avenue.

She reached the house at the end of twenty minutes' hard walking, and going up the steep steps which led to the front door, pulled the ponderous old iron bell. It was evidently a long time since the bell had been sounded, for it seemed to awaken echoes in all directions.

After a short interval the door was thrown open by no less a person than Mrs. Gunning herself.

Mrs. Gunning stared very hard at Rosamond. Rosamond felt her cheeks turning crimson.

"Well," said the governess, "and what have you come for?"

"To see Mrs. Chevening. Can she give me a few minutes?"

"She cannot give you a single one; she never sees visitors. If you have a message for her, you must convey it through me."

"I cannot do that," said Rosamond in a very steady voice; "I must see her myself or not at all. I wish you could manage that I might spend five minutes in her company. I would promise not to agitate or annoy her in the least. Perhaps you would be so very kind?"

"I shall not be so very kind, my little friend," said Mrs. Gunning; her face flushed, and an angry light came into her small eyes. "I know all about what you have come for, Miss Underhill. You want that naughty, disobedient granddaughter of hers to visit you whenever she pleases, in order that you may teach her to be as insubordinate as you probably are yourself. You have found out that you cannot get around me with soft words, and you made up your mind to come straight to the fountain-head—it is clever of you, but it will not pay, let me tell you."

Whatever the end of Mrs. Gunning's speech might have been, it was at this moment interrupted in the most unexpected way. A hand was laid upon her shoulder; she turned quickly to meet the wizened face of a little old lady in a gray dress.

"What are you exciting yourself about, Gunning?" said the little lady; "and who, may I ask, is this young person?"

"My dear Mrs. Chevening, she is a girl who has no business to be here," said Mrs. Gunning. As she spoke she nodded emphatically to Rosamond to go away. "You will feel a draught if you stand there just between the open window and the hall door.

Pray take my arm and let me convey you back again to your sitting-room."

"But I fancied," said Mrs. Chevening, "that I heard this young girl say she wished to speak to me. If such is the case——"

"Yes, I do want to speak to you," said Rosamond, who saw at once that her opportunity had unexpectedly come. "I won't keep you long, and I promise not to say anything exciting. Mrs. Gunning tells me you are not strong."

"Not strong! I am perfectly strong," said Mrs. Chevening. She drew herself up to her full tiny height, and gave Mrs. Gunning a look under which the taller woman lowered her eyelids.

"Leave us, Gunning," she said, waving her hand. "I will find out for myself what the young lady requires from me."

There was no help for it; Mrs. Gunning had to depart in discomfiture.

Mrs. Chevening waited until her footsteps had died away in the passage, then she turned slowly to Rosamond.

"I am certainly not in the habit of seeing visitors," she said, "and you are a bold girl to call upon me as you have done. I am an old lady now, but I still hold the reins in my own house, and when people call, although I do not receive, I wish to be told. Gunning made a mistake in not bringing your name direct to me. I should probably not have seen you, but I might at least have sent you a polite message. I have never yet, that I am aware of, done a rude thing, and I hope I am not going to begin in my extreme old age. As I have unexpectedly come into the hall, I will give you five minutes; follow me, please, Miss—but, pardon me, I did not catch your name."

"My name is Rosamond Underhill," answered Rosamond.

"Come with me, Miss Underhill. I never like to talk to any one where there is a possibility of eavesdroppers being about. I have noticed before now that when Gunning leaves a room she does not quite close the door. We will go to an apartment where we are safe from being disturbed."

As she spoke she began to walk quickly down the hall, and looking back at Rosamond motioned to her to follow.

They passed through a curtained door, and then through a room thickly carpeted, where their footsteps did not make the slightest sound. Then they went into another room, and then into another, and finally found themselves in a very small and cozy parlor, with old-fashioned tapestry covering the walls.

"This is the Tapestry Room," said Mrs. Chevening. "The story worked on the tapestry is full of interest. It illustrates the Spanish Armada, and was worked, I believe, toward the latter end of the days of Queen Elizabeth. You can look at it if ever you happen to come to visit me again. Now, pray seat yourself, and tell me exactly why you have chosen to take up some of my valuable time."

"I have come," said Rosamond, "to talk to you about your granddaughter."

Mrs. Chevening had seated herself on the extreme edge of a high-backed Queen Anne chair. She drew herself up now stiffly, and fixed her cold, gray eyes on Rosamond's blooming face.

"And pray, Miss Underhill," she said, after a pause, in a voice of ice, "may I ask in what way you have become acquainted with my granddaughter?"

"I am prepared to tell you everything," said Rosa-

mond. "I live with my three sisters at a little place not far from here called The Gables."

"I know The Gables—a tumble-down farmhouse. The man who lived there last went bankrupt. The place did not pay. There was too little land. I used to buy some of his eggs from him, but they were never really fresh, and the butter was far from perfect."

"Well, my sisters and I own The Gables now," continued Rosamond, "and we hope very earnestly that we may make the farm pay. On the first day of our arrival my second sister, Barbara, met your granddaughter sitting on a stile close to the highroad. They began to talk, and Barbara—my sister—discovered that your granddaughter was lonely, and that she wanted companions of her own age. Since then Hero has often come to see us."

Mrs. Chevening now rose slowly from her chair.

"Do you mean to tell me, Miss Underhill," she said, "that my granddaugher, Hero Chevening, has been often a guest in your house? Pause—think for a moment. Are you quite certain you are speaking the absolute truth?"

"I am quite certain, Mrs. Chevening. Hero has often visited us, and it has done her good. When she has been with us for an hour, or even less, she begins to look as a young girl should look, happy and bright. Each time she comes she goes away looking more like other girls, with more life, more youth in her." Here Rosamond paused.

"You are a courageous girl, Miss Underhill. Pray go on," said Mrs. Chevening, "I am all attention."

"I mean to tell you everything," continued Rosamond. "I would not have sought you out as I have done if I had not meant to tell you the absolute truth."

"You do right to speak the truth. Now, pray proceed with your story."

"To-day Hero came to us as usual," continued Rosamond. "We had tea together, and afterward we began to play tennis."

"Tennis? What is that? I never heard of it."

"It is a game that girls play a good deal in these days."

"Well, proceed. From personal observation I am drawn to the conclusion that girls are even sillier now than they were when I was young. If you had told me that you all proceeded after tea to take out your needlework and to stitch away at shirts for your brothers I should have considered that you were usefully employed."

"But we have not got any brothers," said Rosamond, with a faint smile.

"Well—pardon the interruption—you played tennis instead? Now proceed with your story."

"We played tennis and we were all very happy. Suddenly Mrs. Gunning arrived. She was very angry. She said that Hero should never come again. Now it would be quite possible for Hero to come without leave, but we don't want her to do that, for stolen visits would not really do her any good, so I thought I would come to you to ask if your granddaughter may visit us. We will faithfully promise to do her no harm."

"I am really enormously obliged to you," said Mrs. Chevening.

She rose as she spoke and walked to the door. When she got there she lifted aside the tapestry curtain which covered it and turned the key in the lock.

"The door is unlocked now," she said. "You can open it and go out."

"But," said Rosamond, turning very pale, "you have not answered me. May Hero really come to visit us?"

"She may not. I do not wish her to associate with you. I mean no disrespect to you, Miss Underhill, but I have my own excellent reasons. Understand, once for all, that they are final. You are a brave girl, and I respect you. You came straight to me, which was perfectly right. You have courage, and I like courage; but if you attempt to see Hero again I must send her away from Chevening Hall."

"I am very sorry," said Rosamond. "You must allow me to say, young girl as I am, that I think you are doing wrong."

"When I feel that I need your opinion on my conduct I will send for you, Miss Underhill," said Mrs. Chevening in the most courteously polite and icily cold voice. Then she dropped a stately curtsey, and poor Rosamond found herself at the other side of the door.

How she walked down the long passage, and got into the hall, and out of the house, she never could quite tell. When she did find herself in the open air she ran all the way home, and finally, when she reached the cozy little drawing-room at The Gables, she burst into tears.

"Why, Rose, what can be the matter?" said Clemency.

"Oh! I don't quite know myself," said Rosamond, "only I did a desperate thing and I utterly failed. Oh, Barbara, and Ursula, and Clemency, don't ask me to tell you anything about my visit to The Hall. I can only say that I have failed and never felt smaller in my life."

CHAPTER X

TENANT MANSIONS

"You can come in, Barbara," said Hero; "oh, yes! The window is wide open, and no one will interfere with us to-night, but I dare say you will never be allowed to climb up the ladder of ropes again. Yes, you have managed everything splendidly, but there's no use in it all, not a bit."

Barbara Underhill, her face flushed, her hands somewhat torn, had just popped her head in at the window of the attic above Hero's room. The hour was between ten and eleven at night; the rest of the house was perfectly still.

"For the first time in my life," continued Hero, "I am really glad that dear Frisk is dead. He might have heard you, and he might have barked as you made that wonderful scramble up the wistaria; I do hope you have not pulled the dear creeper to pieces; now then, draw in the ladder; oh, Bab, it cheers me in spite of myself to see you, but I have bad news for you—very bad."

"Let me get my breath before you tell me," said Barbara as she entered the room.

"Come and sit in this queer old arm-chair; I am almost certain it is the one the ghost occupies when she is not wandering about the house. Oh, what a scratch you have got, right across your cheek."

"As if that mattered," said Barbara; "I was de-

termined not to fail you. Poor Rosamond has been miserable about you all day, Hero. She has, of course, not the faintest idea that I have run away to-night."

"Well, I suppose not. See, the door is locked. I have locked my bedroom door too. Gunning is in bed, and Grannie occupies the other wing of the house. Now sit close to me, and let us whisper together."

Hero's face was paler than usual; there were traces of tears on her cheeks; her large blue eyes looked angry and full of rebellion.

She went up to Barbara's side, knelt close to her, put her arms round her neck, laid her head on her shoulder, and burst into tears.

"I can't help it," she said. "I don't often cry, I assure you, but you cannot possibly imagine what a miserable, wretched day I have just passed."

"Well, tell me everything," said Barbara.

"And the worst of it is," continued Hero, "that it is partly poor dear Rosamond's doing. You know, don't you, that she absolutely had the pluck to come here last night, and to beard Grannie in her den, Grannie, who has not seen a stranger for I should say quite ten years. Well, she had an interview with Grannie, and I have not the faintest idea what Rosamond said to her, but the consequence was as follows. Grannie sent for me to-day, after breakfast. She told me I was not on any consideration to speak to you again. She does not wish me even to know you."

"But I cannot imagine why," said Barbara; "is it because we are not good enough?"

"I don't think it can be that. For if you are not good enough for me, no one else is in all the world. But the fact is this, Bab: there is some mystery about

me, something which I don't understand myself and therefore cannot explain. I have lived at The Hall ever since I was almost a baby, and during all that time I have never had a single companion, except one girl who once spent two nights with me. During all those long years I have never associated with anyone but Mrs. Gunning, Grannie, and the old servant Frances. Frances is nearly as old as Grannie, and a great deal more cranky. You can imagine, can you not, what a lively life I have? Even the use of the library has been denied me, for once a couple of years ago I was found there mounted on the top of the ladder, devouring a book called 'Evelina'; it was such a jolly book—all about the gay world and the men who fell in love with Evelina. It was written by a certain Miss Burney, and I found it fascinating. Grannie by an evil chance happened to come into the library while I was enjoying myself. She asked me what book I was devouring and I told her. Since then the library has been locked, and only Grannie and Mrs. Gunning can go into it. Oh, Barbara, cannot you imagine my wretched life, shut up here with no one to love and little or nothing to do? Gunning does nothing but scold me, and she gives me the stupidest, mustiest, fustiest old books to learn my lessons from. Then a few months ago you girls came and everything seemed changed. It was as if the spring had come; I was so happy. But now I have promised Grannie—she would never rest until I had promised her—I have promised her faithfully not to speak to any of you again. She gave me an alternative; she said if I did not make her that promise she would send me away from The Hall. She did not say where, but I saw by her look, and that awful cold light in her gray eyes,

that she would send me to some desolate place—a sort of prison, in fact, where I might lose my senses."

"Well, it is all most extraordinary," said Barbara. "What can be the meaning of keeping you locked up like this? You say, too, the place will belong to you some day. Do you think, Hero—do you think it possible that your grandmother is right in her mind?"

"I don't know, I am sure," answered Hero, with a weary sigh. "Anyhow, I belong to her, and I am forced to do what she wishes."

"Then you have promised to give us up; you will not let down the ladder of ropes for me again?"

"I have given Grannie the promise she required. I did not do it because I wished to, but because she looked so terrible. I can always defy Gunning, but I cannot face that awful look which comes now and then in Grannie's eyes. You know how small she is, but oh, she is so stately, so cold, so terrible—she stood over me, she did not speak, but just waited for me to say 'Yes' or 'No.' If I said 'No,' I was to go away, this very day. I do not know where, only Gunning and Frances were to take me, and Grannie said she would never see me again, and that when she was dead I would be sorry that I had refused the last request she could make of me. She said, too, that she had known great trouble in her life, and that she would like me to promise to obey her in this particular. Her eyes did look so queer—they seemed to light up from within, and her lips grew straighter and more determined and more cruel than ever.

" 'Before I had this great trouble, Hero,' she said, 'I was like other people, and I used to enjoy life like other people, but I have discovered now that all is vanity, and the less you know of the ways of this wicked world the better.' Then she said again, 'Is it

"Yes," or "No"? Now or never, Hero. Is it to be "Yes," or "No"?'

"So, Barbara, I said it was to be 'Yes,' and then she came up to me and just touched my lips with hers, and her lips were cold and I shivered. I went away to my bedroom and locked myself in, and cried for a couple of hours. Well, now you know everything. What is to be done, Barbara? I made a mental reservation when I gave Grannie that promise that I would see you just once to-night, just to bid you good-by, for I must never see you again."

"It will kill you," said Barbara gloomily.

"I do not think so, for you see I have excellent health, and am as strong as possible."

"Can you not remember any life before you came here?" continued Barbara.

"Partly, in a dreamy sort of way. I know I had a father and mother like other children, and we lived in a big city, perhaps London. The house was large, too, for I remember my nursery was at the top, and I had two servants to wait on me, a nurse and a nursery-maid, and I had two nurseries, a day and a night nursery, and I had heaps of toys. I used to go out in a little carriage, and there was a good deal of fuss made over me. Then there came a dreadful morning when mother rushed up all in a hurry and kissed me, and kissed me as if she would never leave off; and then my outdoor clothes were put on, and I was put into a cab, and the cab drove to a big station, and a woman met me there—she was Mrs. Gunning—we both got into a train and we came here. From that day to now I have never seen mother and I have never seen father again. At first I used to ask Grannie questions about them, but she would never answer me. I was four years old then, now I am nearly sixteen. That is

nearly twelve years ago. During all those weary years I have lived in this house, and have had no companions except Grannie and Gunning, and the old servant, Frances. While Frisk was alive things were not quite so bad, but then Frisk died. Barbara, what is the matter? What a color you have; you have some thought in your head, I know!"

"I have a thought," said Barbara, "a great thought. Oh, Hero, I wonder if you would dare!"

"Would dare what, Bab—what do you mean?"

"I love you very much indeed, Hero," said Barbara.

"Oh, Bab, darling, and I love you!"

"I think I love you better than anyone else in the world," continued Barbara, "even in some ways better than Rosamond. You seem to fit quite tightly to me."

"How sweet you are, Bab! But why do you tell me these things now, now that we must part forever? —it makes the parting all the more bitter."

"I don't know that we need part," said Barbara. "Oh, I must think, I must think very hard. I wonder, if my thought came to anything, if you would really help me!"

"Of course I would if I could; but you know I must not break my promise; you must never come up the ladder of ropes again. Did not I make it nicely? Was not all our plan charming? I had it all arranged, and I had quite a happy time last night thinking it over. You were to come up here every evening for an hour, and just in case Gunning should suspect anything, I was going to make the ghost walk some evening."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, of course, this attic is haunted. She may be listening to us now; she is supposed to walk

at the full moon. Well, she was to walk some night, and you were to be the ghost, and Gunning was just to see you disappearing down a passage."

Barbara laughed.

"Don't you suppose she would run after me and find out?" she asked.

"No fear of that," answered Hero, "poor old Gunning is an awful coward when it comes to anything supernatural; but, oh, dear! there's no use in thinking of anything of that sort now, for I must be true to my word, and after to-night, Barbara, dear Barbara, we must not meet again."

"You can see me again, Hero, if you give back your promise to your grandmother."

"What in the world do you mean?"

"You said 'Yes' to her to-day, but you can change your mind and say 'No.' You can tell her quite frankly the whole reason."

"There would be no use in it, Barbara. Grannie is stronger than I am; she would send me quite away. I would rather be in the misery I know, than go into fresh misery that I know nothing about. I should not have the courage to take back my word, if it is that you mean."

"I don't exactly know myself what I mean to-night—I must think it all over. But just be assured of one thing, I am determined to help you. You have promised that you will not see me again, but you have not promised that you will not write to me and that I must not write to you. Now I will go. Only, Hero, to-morrow night, at this same hour, let down a rope, will you, and I will fasten a letter to it —that letter will tell you what I have really got in my mind."

Barbara went home, but very little sleep visited her

that night. At daybreak she rose, and going to her desk, took out a sheet of paper and a pencil, and began to make certain calculations. Figures were not Barbara's strong point, but on this particular morning they seemed to absorb her most earnest attention. As she scribbled, and compared, and added up, her cheeks grew bright and her eyes full of sparkles. Clemency suddenly popped in her head.

"Bab, do fly downstairs, a fresh batch of chicks is out."

"Don't bother me, Clem—run away," said Barbara.

"But won't you come down just to take one peep? They are such little downy darlings."

"I cannot. Do you not see that I am busy?"

Clemency slammed the door in some impatience, and Barbara went back to her accounts.

Half an hour passed. Somebody threw up gravel at her window. She started impatiently. Ursula, the soft summer breeze blowing her curls about, was standing below.

"Bab, Bab, pray come down! Farmer Jenkins has just brought the new cow; you cannot think how pretty she is. We want you to help us to give her a name."

"Oh, call her anything!" answered Barbara.

"But won't you really come and look at her? I never saw such a darling, she has such lovely eyes. I suggested to Rosamond that we should call her 'Cherry.' Don't you think 'Cherry' would be a good name for her, Bab?"

"An excellent name," answered Barbara, "or—or 'Cowslip'?" she added.

"Dear me, Bab, we have got 'Cowslip' already."

"Well, please don't disturb me now, Ursula, I am

very busy. I will look at the new cow and the downy chicks at breakfast time; I cannot come down at present."

Ursula went slowly away, her ardor somewhat damped.

"I do wish Bab would care for the things we care for," she said in a plaintive voice to Rosamond, and Rosamond, whose smooth face looked as if it could never entertain even the slightest cloud of discontent, felt a shadow come over it for a moment.

"Never mind," she said to Ursula, "we cannot all be made alike." Then she added, after a moment's pause, as she hurried off to the dairy with her two sisters—"I did think Bab would have got to like the farm by this time. I did not know when we all lived in town how very much her heart was set on books."

"It is not only books now," said Ursula, "she is fretting about Hero. Did you not notice how very, very gloomy she was all yesterday evening?"

But after breakfast that morning Barbara was the reverse of gloomy. She even condescended to admire the downy yellow chicks, and to stroke down the satin coat of pretty Mrs. Cherry.

"And I am to learn to milk her," said Ursula. "I expect I shall be rather frightened the first time; but Farmer Jenkins says she is as gentle as a lamb."

"You don't mean to say," answered Barbara, frowning slightly, "that you are going to milk cows, Ursula? Surely that part of a farm life is not necessary for a lady?"

"But I am not a lady, I am a farm girl," answered Ursula stoutly. "I shall like to do it. I think," she added, "I would rather be a farm girl than a lady."

"*Chacun à son goût,*" said Barbara in a nonchalant

voice. She jumped up from her seat at the breakfast table.

"Rosamond," she said, "can I speak to you?"

"Of course, Bab, but is it anything special? for I shall be very busy all day. Farmer Jenkins has most kindly promised to take our butter with his to Charlton to-morrow to sell, and I have got six dozen fresh eggs all buttered and just as fresh as if they were new laid. I have to pack the eggs carefully, and to churn the butter. He will call for our farm produce between three and four in the morning."

"I am sure it is a most fascinating occupation," said Barbara, "but I won't keep you long. If you have finished breakfast shall we go into the drawing-room?"

Rosamond rose, shook some crumbs from her neat little brown holland apron, and followed Barbara into the next room.

"Well," she said, "what is it?"

Barbara shut the door behind her.

"It is only fair to tell you, Rosamond, that I have made up my mind——" began Barbara. She turned somewhat pale as she spoke, and her eyes assumed a wistful expression.

"What about, Bab?" said Rosamond. "Oh, Barbara, dear, the experiment is succeeding so delightfully; why will you throw cold water on it?"

"I don't mean to for you," said Barbara, "but I must for myself. It is all right for you, but it does not suit me. I must map out my own life. I cannot consent to spending it here. I don't care for chickens, nor for cows, nor for any other country pursuit. I am made differently, and I cannot help myself. Rosamond, would it hurt you dreadfully, would it

make a great difference, if I were to take my share of the thousand pounds?"

Rosamond sank down into the nearest chair. She could not help gasping a little.

"It will divide us," she said slowly.

"No, no, darling, not in our hearts," said Barbara, going up to her sister, kneeling by her side, and looking affectionately into her face.

"It will, Barbara; we cannot help it."

"Well, never mind that part now. Are you willing that I should take my share?"

"How can I prevent you? But Mr. Johnson will not like it."

"I don't mind a bit about that; Mr. Johnson is nothing whatever to me. I have a right to my own money, have I not?"

"Oh, yes, you have a right. Aunt Jane made a most extraordinary will. Children as we really are, she has left us full control over our little property. You can have your two hundred and fifty pounds any day you like."

"Well, Rosamond, I should like to have a part of it soon. You and the two other girls can manage the farm without me."

"We can manage, of course, but everything will be different," said Rosamond. "Somehow, Barbara, and you know it, we have always leaned upon you."

"I cannot help myself," said Barbara; she gave a little, impatient shake as she spoke and sprang to her feet. "I cannot stay here," she continued, "the life kills me, it crushes all that is best out of me. I don't care for the things you care for; why should one be sacrificed to three—why should not I make my own life, my own plans, and my own future? Of course I have not quite decided yet what I shall do, but I

wanted to tell you, Rosamond, that I am going to-day to see Mr. Johnson; I shall also have a chat with Lucy Tregunter. Good-by, Rosamond; now I must hurry if I mean to catch the ten o'clock train. I shall be back some time this evening."

"Very well, Bab, only please don't do anything rash. Think of the long years we have lived together such close friends, and I have leaned on you although you are younger than me."

Barbara flung both her hands to her sides.

"I feel hard just now," she said. "I don't seem quite to know myself. I must go to Charlton, I will make a decision there. Of course, I may not be able to do anything, a thousand obstacles may crop up. I don't mean to be cruel to you, Rose, dear Rose, but —but something drives me to do what I am now doing."

She hurried out of the room, and Rosamond, dashing the tears from her eyes, returned to her interrupted farm duties.

Barbara did not take long walking to the little station, and the train arrived in due course, and she found herself at Charlton some time before twelve o'clock. She had planned out a very distinct programme. First of all she would visit Lucy Tregunter. Lucy had left the high school, and Barbara thought it likely that she would be at home. After seeing Lucy, who would probably invite her to stay to lunch, she would go and have her interview with Mr. Johnson. Much of the scheme she had planned out for herself depended on Lucy, for Barbara knew nothing whatever of the world into which she was going to plunge her imprudent little feet. Lucy, on the contrary, knew it well. Lucy had visited London—had seen life, as she expressed it. She could give Barbara just

the valuable information which she needed at this time.

She arrived at the Tregunters' house, and was fortunate in finding her friend at home.

Lucy was in her private sanctum, seated at her desk, as usual, scribbling furiously. She looked up in some astonishment and also some annoyance when the servant announced Barbara's name.

"Barbara Underhill!" she exclaimed. "Why, my dear, I thought you were dead, buried, and done for. What has brought you to life again?"

"I am very much alive," answered Barbara; "I was never dead and buried that I am aware of. Can you give me half an hour of your valuable time, Lucy?"

"Do you want my advice?" asked Lucy.

"Yes, dreadfully."

"Well, you remember you would not take it last time I offered it, and as it happens I am going out to lunch with some special friends of mine; I must be with them sharp at one o'clock. I see it is just twelve now, and I need not go to dress for half an hour; yes, you can have the time you require."

"Thank you," answered Barbara.

She seated herself as she spoke on a chair which commanded a view of the garden and the pretty country beyond the town. Everything looked sweet and peaceful and intellectual in Lucy's sanctum; how different from the farm atmosphere which Barbara hated so much, and which she was so glad to turn her back on for a few hours!

"How are your sisters, and how does the farm work?" asked Lucy, in a nonchalant voice, and yawning slightly as she spoke.

"My sisters are very well," answered Barbara. "They are immersed in poultry cares and in dairy

cares. They think fresh eggs, and fresh butter, and cream and strawberries, and green peas, and all those sort of things, form the essence of life. Oh, Lucy, it is refreshing to come back to you. What new book is that you have got on the table?"

"It is by a man of the name of Frederic, and is called 'Illumination,'" said Lucy briefly; "it is immensely clever, but one has to be specially trained to appreciate it."

"You seem to imply, Lucy, that I should not care for it."

"Not yet, of course; you are much too young. Now let me tell you that you look in remarkably good health, fifty times better than when you were cooped up at that high school all day. Do you know, Barbara, this talk about farm life sounds most refreshing to me?"

"Does it, Lucy? Well, you see, you only hear of it at a distance. I must tell you frankly once for all that I loathe the thing, and what is more, I have made up my mind not to go on with it."

"Then what do you mean to do?" said Lucy, opening her eyes wide, and looking really interested at last.

"I mean to take my share of our fortune, and go to live in London."

"Well, Barbara, you have spirit; I quite admire you."

"I am glad of that, Lucy; but I am afraid, whether you admire me or not, my mind is fully made up. I am going to London; I intend, when I get there, to go on with my education. Some day, some happy day, I shall write of those things of which my heart and head are full."

"Oh, dear, dear! she means to write, does she?"

said Lucy. "A penny for her thoughts, the little darling!"

"Why will you sneer?" said Barbara angrily. "When things are most serious it tries me more than I can say when you put on that unpleasant manner."

"Why do you come to see me, my love, if you dislike my manner?"

"Because you are the only worldly friend I have."

"Thank you greatly for the compliment; so I am your worldly friend?"

"Well, of course, Lucy, I don't mean to offend you by saying it, but you do know a great deal of the world, as it happens, and I know nothing. What I came to see you about to-day was to ask you——"

"I do hope you will speak quickly, Barbara, for time is flying, and I don't wish to offend those acquaintances who do not speak of me as their worldly friend."

"You know quite well what I mean, Lucy! Do try not to be so silly."

"Upon my word, Barbara!" Lucy jumped to her feet.

"Please, Lucy, forgive me; you don't know how anxious and desperate I feel, and I want so badly to know what I ought to do. Some time ago, don't you remember, you told me of some flats in London, where girls, girls who are as young as I am, and alone, can live quite respectably."

"I don't recollect," said Lucy.

"Oh, don't you? But I remember quite well. You had the address of one of these mansions, as they are called, in a notebook. Do find it and give it to me."

Lucy yawned.

"In the rushing life I lead," she said, "it is simply impossible to remember all that one says. However,

Barbara, to be frank with you, I admire your pluck, and think, if you must go to London, you would do well to live in a flat; of course the other girls, or young women or whatever they are called, would help you and give you information. Let me see, where did I put the address you speak of?"

"In one of your numerous address books, you know; you keep them on that shelf."

"You at least have a good memory, Barbara. Yes, I recollect now."

Lucy crossed the room, took down a little brass-bound book from its place on her book-shelf, and opened it.

"Here is the address of some flats," she said. "Tenant Mansions, Baker Street. You had better write to the secretary and find out the particulars."

"I will write this very day," said Barbara. "Did you by any chance enter the price of the flats in your book?"

"I have entered no particulars. I know the flats are meant for girls to live in, and I fancy there is a sort of general restaurant downstairs. If you write to the secretary she will give you full particulars. Is there anything else, Barbara?"

"If you are really in such a hurry to go there is nothing else. I had of course hoped that you would have given me advice, and told me something of what London is like."

"Of what London is like?" echoed Lucy. "You don't suppose for a moment, that you will see the real London from your flat; I mean you won't see the delightful, fascinating London of Society."

"I don't want the London of Society," said Barbara, "I want the London of Intellect. I shall see that, shall I not, even though I am poor?"

"Perhaps you will—you will probably get a ticket for the British Museum, and will be able to go to the Reading Room every day, and get mummified and ossified as quickly as possible. I don't suppose, after all, that you have the genius you imagine yourself to possess, but whether you have it or not, you must prepare for a very rough time."

"I don't mind that."

"Well, Barbara, I really cannot stay another moment. Write to the secretary of Tenant Mansions, that is the first thing. If I can help you in any way later on let me know. Now I must really fly to get dressed."

Lucy gave her friend a little peck on her cheek, and hastily left the room.

Barbara ran downstairs. She did not wait for the grand footman to let her out, but opened the hall door herself.

"Why did I ever care for Lucy Tregunter?" she could not help saying to herself. "How different, how very different she is from Hero! Now that I have secured Hero's friendship I know how false and unsubstantial the feeling I entertained for Lucy really was. Well, she has given me the address of those flats, and I have something to work upon. I must now hurry as fast as possible to see Mr. Johnson."

Mr. Johnson, a round-headed, cheery-looking man, was just going out to lunch when Barbara popped her little face round the door.

"My dear Miss Barbara Underhill," he said, holding out his hand to her, "I am as pleased as possible to see you. Now, you must just come straight home to lunch with me; my wife will be only too glad to welcome you. And what about your sisters, how are they getting on, and how does the farm prosper? Do

you know, I think your sister Rosamond about the pluckiest girl of my acquaintance."

"Things go very well at the farm," said Barbara, "and Rosamond believes she is succeeding; she has got two cows, and is sending butter to the market to-morrow, and a great many new-laid eggs."

"Is she, really? Well, now, you just tell her this. Tell her that my wife and I will take her butter and two or three dozen eggs every week. I'll speak to Mrs. Johnson about it; I know she will be only too delighted to encourage native talent of that sort. I hope you help Rosamond, Miss Barbara, you certainly look strong and stout enough; you ought to be a good hand at milking the cows. Have you learned to master that little difficulty yet, my dear?"

"No, and I don't mean to," said Barbara. "Mr. Johnson, I have come here to-day to talk to you about myself."

"About yourself, child! I hope there is nothing wrong."

"There is nothing wrong. I simply want to tell you that I am not going to be a girl-farmer."

"You are not going to be a girl-farmer!" said Mr. Johnson. "But, my dear Miss Barbara, you are one. You have all taken the farm, and I advanced you money out of your capital to stock it with. I don't know what you mean by saying you are not going to be what you are."

"Please let me speak," said poor Barbara.

"It is one o'clock, and time for my lunch," said the lawyer. "You know my house—not a stone's throw from here. Now just come along with me as fast as you can; I'll give you half an hour after lunch, but not a moment before. Now, then, are you ready?"

Barbara saw there was no help for it. Mr. Johnson

wanted his midday meal, and could not possibly believe that she had any business of importance to confide in him.

"It is dreadful," she said to herself. "Lucy talked to me as if she were laughing all the time. I could scarcely get that address from her, and now Mr. Johnson seems to think I am nothing but a stupid little schoolgirl, hungry for my lunch. Well, I'll show them all what there is in me, before I have done."

Mr. Johnson's house was really a very short distance from his office, and in a moment or two Barbara had been introduced to Mrs. Johnson, a fat, good-natured, roly-poly little sort of woman, who assured her almost in the same breath that she was delighted to make her acquaintance, and that she would never again patronize any butter but that made at The Gables, or any eggs but Rosamond's.

"I am glad your sister has the eggs buttered while they are hot," she said; "it is a first-rate idea. Do you know that, simple as it is, I cannot get the people round here to adopt it. In consequence, eggs a week old are perfectly blue when opened, whereas if they are buttered when hot they ought to be still quite full of milk."

"Well, my dear," said the lawyer, rubbing his hands, "whether eggs be fresh or not, I really want my lunch—I hope lunch is on the table, my dear Susan."

"Yes, James, it has been on the table for two minutes," said Mrs. Johnson. "Come this way, Miss Barbara."

She hurried them into the dining-room, and the lawyer, his wife, and their guest sat down to a very comfortable meal.

After the pudding was withdrawn, Mr. Johnson pushed back his chair, fixed his spectacles on his nose, and stared very hard at Barbara.

"You look first-rate," he said; "you are growing quite a fine girl."

CHAPTER XI

DOING A WILFUL DEED

"Can I speak to you alone?" asked Barbara.

"Yes, of course you can; that is, if you find my wife in the way."

"Oh, James, I don't mind leaving the room," said good-natured little Mrs. Johnson. "I know, my dear," she added, nodding and smiling at Barbara, "that it is far easier to make a confidence to one than to two. I'll just run off to attend to my preserving—I am making strawberry jam this morning. By the way, I suppose your sister Rosamond is great at that sort of thing?"

"I suppose she is," answered Barbara; "I smell jam-making and cooking of all sorts most of the day at The Gables."

"What a capital girl she must be," said Mrs. Johnson as she bustled off. "Now, I should not be a bit surprised if I were to order jams, as well as eggs and fresh butter, from that dear little farm. You give Miss Rosamond my love when you see her to-night, Barbara, and tell her what I say. Tell her, too, that I shall probably pop down and pay her a visit some day next week, and will see for myself what you are all doing. Upon my word, I think girl-farmers ought to be encouraged; it is a nice healthy life, and there is no fear of such girls turning into the odious New Woman."

"Miss Barbara does not look as if she appreciated your remarks, Susan," said the lawyer with a laugh.

'Oh, she will know better when she gets on in years," said the little woman. She hurried off as she spoke, and Mr. Johnson rose slowly and shut the door behind her.

'Now, Barbara," he said, "I am a busy man; what is it you want to say?"

"I won't keep you," answered Barbara, standing up as she spoke and coloring. "I want you to let me have fifty pounds out of my two hundred and fifty."

"Fifty pounds!" said Mr. Johnson, his voice changing. "Come, this is serious. What in the world can a child like you want with fifty pounds?"

"But the money is mine; I mean you cannot refuse it me; you are bound to give it to me if I——"

"If you put a pistol to my head and say, 'your money or your life!' " said the lawyer, laughing.

"Oh, please do take it seriously," said poor Barbara. "Cannot you see that I am dreadfully in earnest? I do not want all my money, but I want fifty pounds. How soon can I have it?"

"Within a week," said the lawyer slowly; "that is, if you have really made up your mind; but you cannot expect me to give it to you without knowing something more about what you mean to do with it than I do at present."

"I will tell you. I don't like farming—I have never liked it. I never wished to live at The Gables. I have tried the experiment, and, as far as I am concerned, it does not succeed. Now, I am very fond of books—there are no books at the farm."

"But there can be. Bless me, there can be heaps of books at the farm. Why, you might subscribe to

Mudie's, and have a box of books down every week. The subscription would only cost a few guineas in the year; and to throw away your capital when you have so little! My dear child, between you and me, that will of Miss Motley's was preposterous; you cannot expect me to act upon it if I can possibly help myself."

"But you cannot help yourself," said Barbara, half laughing and half crying; "and I am afraid the box of books from Mudie's, tempting as it sounds, won't do now, for a great deal more depends upon the fifty pounds than that. I don't only want books, I want the intellectual life."

"Oh, fudge, child! then you are really going to become one of those monsters of the present day—a New Woman?"

"If to be a New Woman means being well educated and taking an interest in life, and seeing plenty of my fellow men and women, then I am going to become one," said Barbara stoutly. "I have made up my mind," she continued. "What you think unlucky is to me a most lucky chance. Instead of waiting until I am twenty-one, as I should have done had Miss Motley made an ordinary will, I can go on with my education at once. My intention is to leave farming and go to live in London."

"By yourself?" Mr. Johnson started up and began to pace up and down the room.

"Upon my word," he said, "I think poor Jane Motley took leave of her senses when she made that will. Did she never find out in the years you were with her that in reality you are stark, staring mad, young lady?"

Barbara could not help laughing.

"I expected you to oppose me," she said; "but after all I have right on my side, have I not?"

"Yes; that is the woeful part. Oh, Jane Motley, what have you not committed me to! Now come, Barbara, let us talk this over seriously. What can a little girl like you do in London by herself?"

"I shall not be by myself."

"Have you got any crack-brained friend to join you in this mad scheme?"

"I shall not be by myself. I must not tell you any more, Mr. Johnson. How soon can I have the money?"

"Oh, pooh! When you have satisfied me about other matters, the money can be easily arranged. Now, then, what does your sister Rosamond say?"

"She does not know yet; but I told her this morning that I was discontented. I will explain everything to her to-night. I mean to live in London. I mean to carry on my education. Some day I shall be able to use the gift which I have within me."

"And what may that be, pray?"

"I shall write books."

"Good heavens!" Mr. Johnson flung up his hands. "The child means to squander her little substance on the chance of a book being taken by a publisher. Why, my dear, the world is sick of badly written books. They deluge the market every week; they are a disgrace to our civilization. And so you mean to join that overcrowded profession—my dear Barbara, you will starve, or die. Something awful will happen if a poor little ignoramus like you plunges into London life."

"I am not quite so silly as you think me," said Barbara. "I shall go, I assure you, most carefully to

work. The mere fact of my only wanting to draw one-fifth of my capital shows that I shall be careful."

Mr. Johnson took out his watch.

"I see that you are a very obstinate girl," he said. "Now, I must tell you candidly that I am much annoyed. If I could stop this by any manner of means, I would, but, of course, I have no control over you, and if affection for your sister—your brave, honorable, kind sister—cannot influence you, no words of mine can. Yes, you shall have the money if you repeat your request within a week; but, will or no will, I refuse to let you have a farthing of it until you have slept over this and consulted Rosamond. These are my last words. I must hurry off to my office. No, Barbara, I will not shake hands with you; I am annoyed—deeply annoyed."

The lawyer left the room, slamming the door after him. Barbara stood very white and still. Mrs. Johnson heard him go, and hurried into the parlor. She saw Barbara standing near the window with her hands locked tightly together and an expression of pain round her lips.

"My dear girl," she said, "is anything wrong?"

"Only that I have offended your husband very much," said Barbara.

"My love, what a pity, and such an easy-going, affectionate man! What can you have done to him?"

"I only asked him to let me have fifty pounds out of my own money because I wish to live in London. I hate the farm, and I won't stay there any longer. Oh, please, Mrs. Johnson, don't begin to scold me about it—I am so sick of being scolded."

"Of course, I won't scold you, you poor little girl! Why, you look quite white and trembling. Now, I tell you what; you shall come into the drawing-room

and rest there, and you shall have a cup of tea before you start on your homeward journey. Come along this minute. I knew what it was to be a girl once myself."

Mrs. Johnson led the way and Barbara found herself a moment later reclining luxuriously in one of the most comfortable chairs in the very luxurious little room.

Mrs. Johnson rang the bell, and when the maid appeared she desired her to bring in tea in half an hour.

"And now I will leave you to yourself," she said. "There are some new magazines on the table, if you care to look at them."

She left the room as she spoke, shutting the door softly behind her.

Barbara lay back where the refreshing breeze from an open window fanned her hot cheeks.

"How cruel every one is!" she said to herself. "Just because I am determined to break my fetters, the whole world seems to oppose me. Of course, Mr. Johnson will be obliged to give me my money, but why should he do it in such a disagreeable way?"

The last number of the *Nineteenth Century* lay close at hand; she took it up mechanically, turned the pages, and soon forgot her sorrows in the interest which a certain article which she began to devour caused her. The half hour passed all too quickly, and Mrs. Johnson returned to pour out tea, and to help Barbara to delicious, hot cake.

"Now, you tell your sister that I am certain to call upon her early next week," she said; "and if I were you, Barbara—without meaning to interfere, of course—I would think seriously over anything James has said to you. He is a man of few words, but he

has very strong feelings. He would never be angry without cause. That London scheme may be all very well, but I would not oppose those older than myself, if I were you."

"I know you are very kind," said Barbara, tears springing to her eyes, "but none of you can understand what this means to me."

Then she got up hastily, put her arm round Mrs. Johnson's neck, and gave her a hearty hug.

"You won't scold me like the others, and I am greatly obliged to you," she said; "but I cannot give up the scheme, for more depends on it than I can explain."

Mrs. Johnson sighed and shook her head.

"Poor, dear child!" she was heard to murmur to herself afterward; "but why is she so obstinate? She will come to grief if she is not careful."

Meanwhile, at a very late hour that evening, after her sisters had all gone to bed, Barbara might have been seen skimming lightly over the ground which divided The Gables from The Hall. It was a dark night, and, as Mrs. Chevening kept no dogs, there was little fear of her being either seen or heard. With trembling fingers she felt along the thick branch of the wistaria just under Hero's window—yes, a thin rope or cord was hanging down. She fastened a letter to it, and then ran home.

"Now I have done the deed," she said to herself. "I wonder what Hero will really decide?"

CHAPTER XII

THE LETTER AT THE END OF THE ROPE

Hero Chevening was naturally a healthy-minded girl; her spirits were good, her outlook on life was bright and full of courage. Had an ordinary life been granted to her, no one could have made a more fascinating, more delightful companion than Hero. Her intellect was of a first-class order; her nature had plenty of poetry and also stability and affection about it. She was true, too, in her character and firm in her intentions. Having made up her mind, she could keep to her resolution without having the strong tinge of obstinacy which characterized Barbara, who never in all her life took it into her head to do something that she did not do that thing by hook or crook. Hero was more easily swayed by reason than Barbara could ever be, but this does not mean that she was in any sense of the word weak or vacillating; in reality she had more width and depth about her than Barbara—her nature was in many ways sweeter, in many ways, also, more honorable. But life had gone hard with Hero; a mystery surrounded her, which she felt rather than understood. Why should she be shut up in this gloomy old house with a grandmother who, to all appearances, did not care about her, with a governess who was in every respect unsuitable and uncongenial, and with an old servant whose delight it was to thwart

her most innocent and natural wishes? Why, above all things, was she not only condemned to this dullest of lives, but precluded from the smallest chance of ameliorating it? Mrs. Chevening's interview with Rosamond had seemed to poor Hero to add the final straw to her misery. When she had desired the young girl to give up all future intercourse with the Underhills, Hero felt that her cup of misery was full to the brim. It did not occur to her, however, to question her fate; there was nothing for it but to submit. When she bade Barbara "Good-by" on that miserable night, and Barbara had climbed down by the ladder of ropes, and Hero had pulled it up into her room and taken it to pieces and thrust it into an old cupboard in the wall, she felt that she had shut away the last gleam of light which represented spring and happiness and youth.

But when the next morning broke, some of Barbara's words came back to her. "I will not give you up," Barbara had said. "Put down a rope of some kind from your window to-night, and I will send you a letter. The letter will contain news."

All through the long day Hero had thought of this letter, and wondered vaguely what it might contain. In Hero's opinion, Barbara and all the other Underhills seemed wonderfully strong, wonderfully heroic girls. Their knowledge of the world, compared to hers, was immense. They knew life, and Barbara in particular seemed to Hero to be the very essence of good sense and cleverness.

The day which followed was as dull as it could be. Mrs. Gunning was more disagreeable; she gave Hero longer and duller lessons than usual. Her task of sewing was more irksome than it had ever been before, but all through the weary hours Hero thought of what

might happen at ten o'clock at night. She began to rest on Barbara, and to wonder what her letter would contain.

The long day passed at last. Mrs. Gunning retired early to bed, the house sank into its usual absolute stillness, and Hero went up to the attic to wait anxiously for her letter. By and by she heard, or fancied she heard, swift footsteps coming across the lawn. How she wished for the moon, in order that she might see Barbara's dear face! Peering down, however, through the darkness she could catch no sight of anyone, but presently a slight twitch of the rope told her that her friend had not forgotten her. She pulled it up hastily, took the letter which was fastened to one end, and kissed it several times. She then flung herself down on the nearest chair, tore open the envelope, and read as follows:

"Dear Hero," wrote Barbara; "have you pluck or have you not? If you have, I will help you. I have fully made up my mind not to live any longer at the farm. In a week's time I am going to London. You don't know anything about London, nor do I, but I am going there; I shall live in a place called a flat. There will be, I believe, three rooms—a bedroom, a sitting-room, and a kitchen. When in London I shall be entirely my own mistress. I can go to a great, big heavenly place called the British Museum, which contains copies of all the books that are printed in every part of the world. I shall be able to read there from morning till night, and to take copious notes of what I read, and then I shall be able to return home in the evening, and perhaps write out my thoughts. I shall also see life in various ways, and get to know many people. I fully expect to do well. Now, dear Hero, I know you have no money, but I have a little,

and I am very, very anxious to help you. Will you, Hero, come with me to London? Will you share my dear little flat with me, and go every day to the British Museum and read the books you long to read, and learn the things you long to learn? Will you walk with me through the wonderful London streets and see the crowds of people passing, passing, passing, every day, and all day long? There is a place called the National Gallery, where we shall see wonderful, glorious pictures; and there are parks, where we can see carriages and horses and lovely flowers, and gay, happy men and women, and we can learn and learn and learn, and no one will ever scold you, Hero, dear, and you shall be just as happy as the day is long. If you will have courage to make up your mind to come with me, just write the one word 'Yes,' and twist it up in a bit of paper and send it down by the rope, and I will come to fetch it to-morrow evening. Then you must simply leave all the rest to me. I will promise to take you where no one shall discover you. I think I can manage that part; and surely you will be happier with me than in your present wretched life, and, perhaps, when your grandmother really misses you, she may be induced to behave more kindly to you. I have set my heart on having you. Now, won't you make up your mind and be brave enough to say 'Yes'?"

CHAPTER XIII

YOUNG ADVENTURERS

Nearly a fortnight went by, and at last there came a morning when Hero awoke with a very queer sensation at her heart. On the evening of this day she was to leave The Hall, as she fully expected, forever. She was to bid her old-fashioned grandmother, and dull Mrs. Gunning, and the servants good-by. Not outwardly, of course, for Hero was to steal away from the home which might be hers some day, like a thief in the night. She had agreed to all Barbara's propositions: she was to climb down from the attic by the help of the wistaria and the ladder of ropes, and Barbara and she in the dead of night were to go up to London. Nobody else knew anything about it, not even Rosamond. Barbara had told her sister that she intended to leave home some day, but did not mention when. Mr. Johnson had been induced to trust her with fifty pounds of her own money. Barbara intended to leave a letter behind her for her sister, but no mention whatever was to be made of Hero.

It was from first to last a wild and unpractical scheme, planned by Barbara in a spirit of defiance, and accepted by Hero with shining eyes and a beating heart. Now, at last, the day of delivery had come. Hero could take no clothes away with her besides those in which she had to travel. She intended to leave

a note for her grandmother, simply telling her that she was obliged to retract the promise she had given a fortnight ago, that she could not do without the Underhills, and that she was going out into the world to seek her fortune. The note was to be fastened to the pincushion in her room, and then the two young adventurers would start out into the cold world.

It was all like a wonderful dream to Hero, but Barbara knew well what she was about. Barbara, with all her enthusiasm and dreaminess, had a certain amount of the matter-of-fact in her. She had written to the secretary of the Tenant Mansions, and was told by her that there was no flat to be let in that desirable house. But further correspondence had induced the secretary to furnish Barbara with addresses. To these addresses she had written, and had at last found a little corner for herself and Hero in Strawberry Mansions, not very far from the British Museum.

Her memory of the London she had left after her mother's death was of the slightest, but the secretary had kindly given her full information with regard to her journey, and had told her at what great terminus she would arrive. Once there, it would be easy for the girls to take a cab and drive straight to their destination.

The flat which Barbara had secured for herself and Hero would be unfurnished, but she did not consider that of much consequence. The girls could buy the necessaries of life on the following day; and the more exacting and picnic-like their life was at first, so much the better.

Hero was not anxious at all about the journey; she left everything in Barbara's hands. To Hero, Barbara appeared an accomplished and up-to-date woman of the world.

It was a hot day early in July when Hero got languidly out of bed. In spite of her excitement, there was a sorrow at her heart. She was about to do a very bold thing; brave as she undoubtedly was, her courage began slowly to fail her. At breakfast-time she was almost annoyed because she fancied Mrs. Gunning spoke to her in a kinder voice than usual.

"I wish she would quarrel with me to-day," thought the young girl. "When she talks in that comparatively gentle voice, and looks at me with those comparatively kind eyes, I feel that I am a brute to leave her. Now, I hate being a brute. I want her to appear in her real character to-day. Oh, it is too bad of her to be a little bit nicer than usual!"

Mrs. Gunning seemed to be reading some of Hero's thoughts.

"You look pale," she said. "It is the hot weather. I happen to be particularly busy to-day. I am going to have the library turned out. I will excuse your morning lessons."

"Oh, please don't!" said Hero, jumping up in consternation.

"Please don't?" echoed Mrs. Gunning. "What new trait in your character is this? Are you going to turn studious?"

"Oh, no," said Hero, coloring, and half afraid that her governess would read her secret. "Of course, I am really glad to have a holiday; it is delightful. Only, I don't want you to be overworked."

"Oh, my dear, you need not think about me. It is really a relief to turn to something besides those everlasting tasks. You might practice your music, Hero; only, if you do, go up to the old attic and use the piano there. I forgot to mention that your grandmother is ill."

"Grannie ill?" said Hero, turning pale.

"Yes; a trifling indisposition. Nothing to excite you. Please run away now. I am going to be dreadfully busy."

Hero was only too glad to leave Mrs. Gunning; but she had scarcely got into the entrance-hall before the old servant, Frances, came up to her.

"Miss Hero," she said, "you are to go to your grandmother immediately."

"To Grannie?" echoed Hero.

"Yes, my dear. Don't stare at me; go at once."

"Is Grannie really ill?" asked the young girl.

"There is nothing whatever of consequence the matter with her, miss. She has just had a restless night, that is all."

"Do you mean that I am to go to her now, Frances?"

"Of course, miss. You ought to know by this time that Mrs. Chevening does not like to be kept waiting."

Hero ran off; she entered her grandmother's bedroom. It was still quite early in the day, and the old lady never rose until after noon. She was sitting up in bed, an old-fashioned mob cap tied about her head, her night-dress standing out in stiff frills round her neck, and a little knitted shawl fastened round her shoulders.

"Come here, Hero," she said, the moment she saw her granddaughter. "Sit there on the side of the bed. I want to speak to you."

"Yes, Grannie," said the girl.

"You are growing quite tall, my dear."

"Am I?" answered Hero.

"Yes; you are already much taller than I am. I was much admired for being small. In my day, Hero, little women were the fashion. Now it is all the rage

to be big and masculine. By the way, how old are you, Hero?"

"Fifteen and a half," answered Hero.

"You will soon be grown up. In my day girls were quite grown up at seventeen. I married when I was seventeen. You will be grown up in a year and a half; then, I suppose, you will wish to see the world."

"Oh, Grannie, do you mean it? Do you mean me to see the world when I am grown up—that is, in a year and a half?" said Hero, beginning to tremble, and a queer faintness taking possession of her heart.

"I am not going to say what I mean, Hero. I only allude to what young girls as a rule expect."

"But, grandmother, if you really did—did mean that in—in a year and a half I might——"

"What are you trembling and hesitating for, child? You don't know how dreadfully it annoys me. If you have anything on your mind, pray speak out."

"If you would promise me something?"

"I will most emphatically promise you nothing."

"Grandmother, you don't know how sick I am of my present life."

"Very likely, Hero; but it is quite impossible for me to alter matters. As far as I can tell, there is no apparent end to the sort of life you now lead. I come of a strong family, and I may live for many, many years. Whenever I die, this place——"

"Yes?" said Hero, breathlessly.

"How excited you are! You quite look as if you longed for my death."

"Oh, grandmother, you know better," said Hero in a tone of reproach.

"Well, my dear, I am not scolding you. Whenever I die this place will belong——"

"To me?" interrupted Hero.

"No; there is another life between you and it."

"Grandmother, what can you mean? Another life?"

"Your father's life, Hero."

"My father's?" said Hero, springing to her feet. "But surely, grandmother, my father is dead?"

"He is alive."

"But where is he? Oh, tell me all about him."

"He is alive, Hero; that is all I mean to say at present. There may come a time before long when you will see him. Not here; no, he is never to come here. When I die this place will belong to him; he will, in all probability, make ducks and drakes of it."

"What is that, Grannie?"

"You will know when he takes possession. At his death it will be yours. When that times comes your life will be your own; you can do as you please, you can be as gay as you please, as frivolous as you please, as utterly silly as you like; until then you belong to me, and the mode of life I have sketched out for you I mean to continue."

"Then you will not let me see the world when I am seventeen?" asked Hero.

"Not if I am alive and well. Now, I sent for you this morning in order to tell you that I think you are a very good girl in giving up your wishes with regard to those Underhills."

"Oh, please don't praise me, grandmother."

"I repeat that I consider you a good girl. You come of a fine stock; only there have been faulty members—yes, yes, terribly faulty members. As long as I live, I shall continue to perform what I consider my duty toward you. I shall guard you from this

evil world. Now go, child; I don't wish to see you again to-day."

"Grannie, if—if I could be of the least importance to you."

Mrs. Chevening laughed. Her laugh was very like a cackle; it was hard and thin and disagreeable to listen to.

"Importance to me," she repeated. "You, a child like you—you are not of the slightest importance; don't imagine such a thing for a moment."

"I mean this," said Hero. "I am very much in earnest. Does it make the least bit of difference to you, Grannie, my being in the house?"

"It only makes an added trouble," said the old lady. 'Not that I shirk my duty—it is my duty to look after you, and I will do so as long as I live. Now, I will thank you, my dear, to ring the bell; I want Frances to come here. Go away, Hero. Don't torment me with any more questions."

"I am glad she was a little rude and hard at the end," thought Hero, as she slowly left the room; "she makes what I have to do to-night less difficult."

She went out into the grounds, and wandered away to where Frisk lay buried in a small grave on the summit of a little knoll. She made a fresh wreath of flowers to put on the grave, and then she stooped down and kissed the earth, and came back and went slowly up to the attic and played over her old tiresome pieces of music.

"It is one comfort," she said to herself, as she strummed away at "Les Cloches du Monastère," "that no one in the whole house will miss me when I am gone. But what does Grannie mean about father? So father is still alive—perhaps mother is alive, too. What can they both have done? I can scarcely re-

member either of them, but I believe I have a picture of them somewhere, an old photograph. I will run and hunt it up."

Leaving the piano wide open, Hero rushed down to her bedroom. Here Frances was busy turning it out.

"Dear me, Miss Hero," she said, "how you do clatter about! Why will you pull your drawers open just as I am dusting the room?"

"I want to find a photograph of my father and mother," said Hero. 'Frances, do you remember them?"

"Do I remember your parents, Miss Hero?" said Frances, slightly coloring and looking as if she were taken aback. "Well, 'tain't likely I should forget 'em."

"Do you know what Grannie said to me to-day?"

Frances stared hard at Hero without replying.

"She said that father was alive, and that I might see him again some day. How queer you look, Frances; you have turned quite white."

"I thought the old lady was not herself," muttered Frances; "it is very unlike her to let out nonsense of this sort. Now, look here, miss; don't you mind a word your grandmother has said."

"But if it is true?"

"When people are past eighty they don't always talk the truth," said Frances.

"But grandmother spoke the truth, I know."

"Well, miss, it's neither here nor there as far as I am concerned—I have nothing whatever to say about it. As far as I can tell, your father is dead, and so is your mother."

"I know you are concealing something from me," said Hero angrily. "Why will every one conspire to

treat me just as a silly baby? Look here, Frances, I won't stand it any longer."

"Don't you get into one of your tantrums, miss; I'm not in the humor to bear it. Now you have found that photograph, please go out of the room and let me finishing doing it out."

"Oh, please don't be angry with me to-day, Frances."

"Well, don't you be aggravating, miss."

Hero went down to the schoolroom; she opened the little case which contained a couple of photographs of her parents. The photographs were faded. She gazed at them with a great deal of earnestness. Her mother's dress was old-fashioned. She looked long and fixedly at the face. It was sweet without, perhaps, a great deal of character; but the lips were pathetic and the eyes full of pleading. Nevertheless, at this moment it did not appeal to Hero. She turned with greater interest to her father's. It was a dark face with good-humored blue eyes like her own, a beautifully cut mouth, and aristocratic features.

"After all, I won't take these photographs away," thought the girl; "there is nothing in either of these faces to specially draw me—and yet, and yet, there is a strength about father's eyes, and perhaps he would let me love him. If he would let me love him, I should be a very happy girl. How unnatural, how strange I feel to-day! Fancy my going away with Barbara Underhill, a girl who is no relation; but it does not matter, for no one loves me here. If father were really alive, and if he would let me love him, then how happy my life would be!"

When it grew dark Hero sat down in her bedroom and wrote a note:

"Dear Grannie [she wrote], I cannot bear this life; it is too like prison, so I am going away. I am going to be quite happy and well taken care of, so please don't be a bit anxious about me. Do not try to find me, Grannie, for I am never coming back. I would have stayed with you willingly if you had ever been the least little bit fond of me; but I cannot do any longer without some one to love. So I take back that promise I gave to you about a fortnight ago. The life here is unbearable, and I am going away.

"Your granddaughter,
"Hero Chevening."

This note, after the time-honored custom, was fastened on to her pincushion, and then, having put on her best Sunday frock and white hat, she waited impatiently for the signal which Barbara was to give her below.

Mrs. Gunning was particularly tired that night, and went early to bed. She was startled just at the last moment by Hero running in and offering to kiss her.

"Good-night, Gunning," she said; "I just wish to say——"

"Oh, don't bother me now with any of your sayings, Hero," said her governess crossly; "I have a great deal on my mind."

"Have you seen Grannie?" asked Hero.

"Yes; I have just bidden her good-night."

"Does she seem quite well?"

"Perfectly well; why not?"

"I thought this morning she was not quite herself."

"She has absolutely recovered. Now go to bed, and don't talk any more nonsense. Be up early in

the morning; I shall give you some extra lessons to make up for this enforced holiday."

Hero crept up to her attic quite cheerfully.

"Gunning is nice and nasty to-night," she said to herself. "It is delightful. Now I shall not have one bit of regret when I go."

She turned the key in the attic door, opened the tiny window, and looked out. It was a dark night, which was all the better. A soft breeze came in at the window and fanned Hero's flushed cheeks. She began to think of Frisk in his lonely grave. In reality, the only regret she felt at leaving The Hall was the thought of Frisk; he would no longer have nice flowers laid upon his grave.

"If the dear dog can think, he will miss them," she said to herself; "but of course he does not think any more. He was the only creature that ever loved me all the time I was at The Hall. I am glad, very glad I am going with Barbara, for Barbara does love me."

At this point in her meditations soft footsteps were heard gliding across the lawn.

Hero listened, her heart beating fast—the footsteps paused under the window. It was too dark to see Barbara's face.

Hero took the ladder of ropes, which she had remade once more, out of her cupboard, and fastened it securely to the window-ledge. She then dropped it down, and Barbara made it taut below.

"Cling tightly on to the wistaria," whispered Barbara; "I nearly fell when I got down that night; but if you cling on to the wistaria you will be all right."

Hero was light and agile as a cat—she soon climbed down the ladder.

"Free at last," she said, gasping for breath. She turned, and clasped Barbara's arm.

"We are not out of the woods yet," whispered Barbara back; "not until we are safe in the train. Oh, Hero, Hero! now that I am really doing it, it does seem dreadful."

"For goodness' sake, don't frighten me, or I'll go back at once," said Hero.

"That would be nonsense; we'll be all right when we are in the train. I sent off my luggage this morning. Not a soul knows that I have left home for good. Poor Rosamond! I could cry when I think of her face in the morning."

"Barbara, if you feel like that, do let us give it up," said Hero, standing away from her friend and trembling.

"As if I could!" said Barbara. "Of course, I knew there would be pain at the end; it is the wrench, you know; but we'll both be all right when we are in the train going to London; and in three months' time I'll write to Rosamond. I left her a nice letter, telling her she would hear from me in three months. Oh, what a horrid life a farmer's is! Well, I am free of it at last."

"And I am free of Gunning, and Grannie, and Frances," said Hero with a laugh. "Barbara, is it safe for us to stay talking here any longer?"

"No, we had better hurry away," said Barbara. "Hold my arm, Hero; that will prevent your falling. Now, are you accustomed to walking in the dark, or not?"

"I know every inch of the place," answered Hero.

"Well, we must go quickly. We have four miles to get to Kettering Junction, and the train arrives there a few minutes after twelve; it is now a quarter to

eleven, so we really have not too much time. Why, surely, Hero, you are not going in those slim shoes?"

"I have a pair of thick ones in my handbag; I was afraid to put them on before because they creak so dreadfully. Gunning says they are cut on the cross. I'll put them on when we reach the stile."

"Well, come along; let us be quick."

The girls hurried forward in silence; both their hearts were beating fast. At this latter end of the nineteenth century it seemed queer and out of date to be simply two adventurers stealing from their homes; nevertheless, the excitement and the strangeness kept Hero up, and Barbara's thoughts were all her own.

They reached the stile, where Hero changed her shoes.

Then they plunged boldly into the dusty high-road.

"I have some sandwiches and a little sherry in this bag," said Barbara. "I thought, perhaps, Hero, you would be hungry on the journey."

"I feel as if I could never eat again," said Hero. "How my heart does thump! Does yours thump, Barbara?"

"I should think it does—it half chokes me; but when we are in the train we'll be all right."

"Do you know, Barbara, Grannie was not well last night. She had a long talk with me this morning. Had she said something which she did not say, I would have given up going with you."

"Well, for goodness' sake, don't talk of it now; I am just as nervous as possible," said Barbara.

They walked steadily forward, their footsteps keeping time, their hearts beating wildly. The long winding road to Kettering seemed as if it would never end.

At last they saw the straggling houses, which made up the little town, and the chimneys and outposts of the station. They arrived at Kettering Station just as the clock struck twelve.

"We are barely in time," said Barbara with a pant. "What a good thing we did not loiter on the road."

A sleepy-looking porter was standing on the platform. He stared as the dusty, draggled-looking girls came in.

"We want to catch the train to London," said Barbara; "are we in time?"

"Yes, miss, plenty of time if you look sharp. The train is just signaled; there is the booking-office."

Barbara hurried to the office; she bought two third-class tickets, and a moment later the great train came booming in.

The porter shoved the girls into a third-class compartment, already half-full of people, the whistle sounded, and the train left the platform.

CHAPTER XIV

BARBARA'S LITTLE PIN-PRICKS OF CONSCIENCE

THE day was a sultry one, toward the beginning of September, and not a breath of air seemed to come through the wide-open windows of the little flat. Barbara was seated with her legs curled up under her on the broad ledge of the open window. She had a small account book on her knee, and was putting down figures and casting up sums with a perplexed expression on her face. Her thick black hair was hanging over her brow. The color which had given character and force to her expression when in the country had now left her cheeks; they looked thin and somewhat sallow. As she sat, her dress was hitched up at the side, and one somewhat forlorn-looking little slipper was thrust into view.

Hero Chevening was standing near a small stove, busily engaged frying eggs and bacon for tea. Hero looked as smart as Barbara did the reverse. She was neatly dressed in a long, plain frock, which hung about her graceful figure in soft folds. Her thick hair was turned up into a picturesque mass of confusion at the back of her head. There was a great deal of color in her cheeks, and a considerable amount of animation in her dark-blue eyes. She was turning her eggs with the air of an expert, and chatting volubly all the time.

"I wish, Hero, you would stop talking!" called out

Barbara. "I am always getting these dreadful accounts so mixed. I am quite determined to put them straight before I go to bed to-night."

Hero did not say another word. She bent over her eggs, then started back as the hot fat sputtered into her face. Soon the eggs were cooked to perfection, and were popped on to a hot dish. Hero put the dish into the oven, and then proceeded to lay the cloth. She laid places for three, put bread and butter on the table, made some coffee, and finally placed the dish with the eggs and bacon at one end of the board.

"Now, Barbara, come along; tea is ready," she called out. "I don't suppose you mean to wait for Lucy?"

"I make a point of never waiting for Lucy," said Barbara, frowning as she spoke.

She got off the window-ledge, drew up her figure, stretched her arms, and gave vent to a yawn.

"How dreadfully close it is," she said with a gasp. "I am certain we are going to have a thunderstorm. Oh, Hero, you have forgotten to turn off the gas! That is one reason why the room is so insufferably hot."

"Half of your discontent, Barbara, arises from the fact that you will never take your meals properly," replied Hero.

Barbara seated herself, raised the cover from the appetizing little dish which Hero had prepared, and helped herself to a fried egg and a morsel of bacon.

"I am not hungry," she said. "I thought, of course, I should be ravenous; but somehow or other, Hero, those dreadful accounts take all the appetite out of me."

"I wish you would give them to me to do," said Hero in a gentle voice.

She smoothed back her own hair, and helped herself to an egg, which she began to eat with appetite.

"If ever there was any one who utterly astonishes me, you are that person, Hero," said Barbara, after a pause, as she gazed fixedly at her friend. "I never thought that I should get tired of living in London and reading at the British Museum, and living in a little flat like this; but the fact is——"

"Don't say you are tired. Don't say you want to give it up," said Hero, a note of pain in her voice.

"I don't mean to give it up; my pride would say 'No' to anything of that sort. But the fact is, I am just in a down mood at the present moment."

"Of course you are, you poor, dear old Babs!" said Hero. "Now you are not to speak until you have made a right good meal. Do you see this plump egg? Have not I done it beautifully? You are to eat it. Oh, yes, I insist! And you are to drink off your cup of coffee. Afterwards we will go to the top of the house and sit on the leads."

"I hate sitting on the leads; one gets so covered with smuts."

"We will take a shawl and spread it on the floor, and we can take our camp chairs and have quite a cozy time. Barbara, I don't think Lucy can be coming to-night."

"It does not matter whether she comes or not," said Barbara, suppressing another yawn. "Hero, I wish I had your spirit. I never supposed I should be the one to give in."

"It is just because you are not well, poor darling. You work too hard, and have not enough to eat. I am certain when you use your brain as much as you do, Barbara, you ought to have plenty of nourishment—good meat, and all that sort of thing."

"Really, Hero, you quite distress me. You talk as wisely as if you were an old woman."

"In some ways I feel like an old woman," answered Hero, "but in other ways I do not. I never felt happier in my life than I do now. It is the freedom and the change," she added. "Oh, the life is delightful!"

The two girls were seated in the little kitchen of the flat. It was a tiny room, beautifully built, but furnished in a very scanty manner. The kitchen opened into a small sitting-room, which opened again into a minute bedroom. Hero slept on a sofa in the sitting-room, and Barbara had the bedroom to herself. A ten-pound note had furnished the flat.

The girls had now lived in London for over two months; but the weather, September as it was, was sultry and motionless in the extreme. The atmosphere felt stagnant, the green trees looked no longer green, but gray. Barbara, although she hated to acknowledge it even to herself, longed indescribably for the fresh, pure air of the country. There was an ache at her heart which she would scarcely admit that she possessed.

Hero, on the contrary, was so fully alive to the pleasures of her present life that she had no time for gloomy musings. She was naturally a bright, merry-hearted girl, and inclined to make the best of everything.

"There, I have finished at last," said Barbara with a sigh. "Perhaps there will be a little more air on the roof. Come along, Hero; let us get out there."

Hero rose quickly.

"Just let me put by the tea-things first," she said. "If you go up, Barbara, I'll be with you in less than five minutes."

Barbara slowly left the room, and Hero soon joined

her. She brought an old shawl, which she spread under Barbara's feet; and then the two girls opened their camp chairs and seated themselves comfortably.

There was not a cloud in the heavens. The sun had long set, and the stars were out. Barbara put her hand to her forehead.

"How my stupid head aches!" she said.

"You have headaches because you have taken too much upon you," said Hero. She looked anxiously at her companion.

Barbara lay back in her chair, with great black shadows under her eyes. She did not look a bit like the girl who had been so resolute and defiant not three months ago at The Gables.

"Look here," she said, bending forward and touching Hero on her sleeve, "I have almost made up my mind to do something."

"What is that?" asked Hero.

'To write to Rosamond."

"I am very glad; I think you ought to have done so long ago."

"I could not bring myself to the scratch. Now I am going to confide something to you, Hero. From the day I set foot in this flat an ache began in my heart, which has never ceased day nor night. I think I have behaved very badly to the girls at home. I hate myself for it. I shall write to Rosamond and tell her where I am."

"But you don't think of giving it all up?" said Hero, a new timidity coming into her voice.

"No, Hero; how could I? Why, fifty pounds of our money has gone. How we spent it I don't know, for we have certainly been most careful; we have not allowed ourselves a single unnecessary luxury.

"We have allowed ourselves no luxuries," said

Hero stoutly. "But please don't forget, Barbara, that twenty-five pounds out of that fifty I am bound to return to you."

"You! but you cannot do it. You are far less fitted than I am to earn your own living."

Hero did not reply, but a smile flitted across her bright face.

"We won't talk about money matters to-night," she said after a pause; "they are always worrying. Will you write to Rosamond now, or will you wait until the morning?"

"I could not write a coherent word to night; I must wait until to-morrow. Of course, Rosamond does not expect to hear from me until the three months are up, but if I write sooner she will be all the better pleased. Oh, dear, I wonder how she is, and how they are getting on at the farm, and how the other girls are! It is dreadful, you know, Hero, to be one of four girls, and suddenly to see nothing at all of one's sisters."

"I suppose so," answered Hero; "I never had a sister, therefore I don't fret. I don't feel sorry about Grannie, nor Mrs. Gunning, nor Frances. You know, Grannie did tell me that I was a bother in the house. Perhaps she is much happier now I am not with her; but I have been useful to you—you love me, do you not, Bab?"

"I should simply have died without you," said Barbara in an affectionate tone. She leaned up against Hero as she spoke.

"Things are so different from what I expected," she said, "and of all people no one has more disappointed me than Lucy Tregunter. When she came to town and looked us up, I thought she was going to be kind, and she does know a lot of literary people; and when we were asked to that 'At Home,' don't

you remember, Hero, how excited we both were? And I absolutely spent two or three pounds over our dresses. She said she would introduce us to one or two real, living writers, and there was an artist, who was her special friend, and we were to get to know him. And then one of the professors at the British Museum, who would let me see books which ordinary girls could not get at, was to be there. Oh, what did she not promise, and then when the night came we were just allowed to sit in a corner, and no one took a scrap of notice of us. Lucy just nodded when we came in, and did not speak to us the whole evening. Didn't I hate her for it!"

"Well," said Hero, "it was not so bad as all that, to me at least; and I think, Barbara," she continued, "that you are a little hard on Lucy. She ought not to have made the promise, of course, but she is naturally very thoughtless, and thinks a great deal of herself. People who think of themselves have not much time to think of others—how can they?"

"You speak as if it were not a fault to think so much of one's self," said Barbara in surprise.

"I don't know anything about that," answered Hero lightly; "only, somehow, I don't blame Lucy much, for she does live up to her character. It amuses me very much to study character. I see all sorts here, from Mrs. Halliday, on the next floor, to your friend, Lucy Tregunter. When I have settled in my mind what sort of character a person has, it rather vexes me than otherwise if that person does not live up to my imaginings. Now, Lucy has never disappointed me, so I am not angry with her."

"Well, after all, you had not so much cause to be angry as I had. Do you remember that nice, white-

haired old man who talked to you, and asked you lots of questions?"

"None of which I was able to answer for fear of betraying your secret, Barbara. Oh, Bab, I am glad you are going to write to Rosamond at last!"

"It will take a weight off my mind," said Barbara; "and now that my head has got a little cooler I will just get straight into bed. I want to be at the British Museum as soon as it opens to-morrow, for I have a particularly hard day's work to get through."

CHAPTER XV

HERO TO THE RESCUE

EARLY the next morning Barbara was up; her headache was forgotten, she was once more enthusiastic and eager. She ate a hearty breakfast, and soon afterward started for the British Museum. When she left the room Hero glanced around her.

"Now, then," she reflected, "to be as quick as possible over the necessary work, and then for my promised interview with Lucy Tregunter."

She slipped her hand into her pocket and took out a purse. It was a small purse, and decidedly very flat. She opened it and took out half a crown.

"Only one half-crown," she murmured. "If ever two-and-sixpence was meant to do a good day's work this is the one. It must buy dinner for Barbara and me, and something for supper, and a little more tea. Tea is so expensive, but there is not another scrap in the canister. Then it must pay my omnibus fare to Lucy's grand house in Belgravia. Well, somehow it will have to manage; and now I have not a moment to waste."

Hero put on her hat and ran downstairs. She soon reached the shops, made her small purchases, and came home again.

"How delicious that little chop will be when I cook it in the way Flora Steele told me!" she said to herself; "and Barbara shall eat every single scrap of

it. I have often noticed that Barbara seems ever so much brighter after she has had a downright good meal. Well, she shall have her chop for dinner. As for me, it is really well that I like eggs, for I certainly do manage to consume a good many. Here are two eggs for my dinner, and a chop for Barbara's, and this little salad will be delicious when it is cut up—oh, and these apples were so cheap that I was tempted to get a pound. We live luxuriously, when all is said and done; and there is plenty of money over to pay my omnibus fare to Belgravia."

Hero looked at the little Bee clock on the mantelpiece. It now pointed to a quarter to ten.

"Time is getting on," she said to herself. "I would not have Bab miss me when she returns home between twelve and one for the world. So now I must hurry away as fast as ever I can."

Taking the key of the flat in her pocket, she ran downstairs, soon found the right omnibus, and got upon the roof. Here she really did enjoy herself. The convenances of society meant nothing at all to Hero Chevening. The knowledge that she was a little Bohemian, living as best she could, and enjoying herself thoroughly, was at present the very breath of her existence. More than one fellow-passenger stared at the bright-looking, pretty girl, commented on the happy smiles which came and went on her rosy lips, on the light in her frank eyes, on the pleasant expression of her face.

When Hero jumped up at last to go down the omnibus stairs, an old gentleman held out his hand to assist her.

"Thank you," she said, bestowing a bright smile upon him, which he remembered during the rest of the day.

"Doubtless she lives about here," he said to himself. "A good girl, well bred, and every inch a lady—any one can see that with half a glance at her."

Meanwhile, Hero was hurrying down several streets, until at last she reached her destination. Lucy's father had taken a house in Eaton Square for the season. The season was over long ago, but, for some reason, Lucy liked to linger in town. It is true she had been abroad for three weeks, but was now back again in Eaton Square for at least a fortnight. She had paid more than one visit to Barbara and Hero, and Hero was now coming to see her by special appointment.

She ran up the steps of the big house and sounded the front door-bell vigorously. A man-servant opened the door and stared superciliously at the humble-looking little applicant for admission. Shabby as Hero's dress was, however, there was something about her face which always inspired respect. When she asked if Miss Tregunter were in, the man was obliged to reply civilly.

"I have come by appointment," said Hero. "Will you kindly say that Miss Hero Chevening has called?"

"Come this way, please, miss," he said.

He conducted Hero into a small but prettily furnished room on the ground floor.

"I will inform Miss Tregunter that you are here, miss," he said.

He closed the door softly behind him.

A moment later Lucy came in. As she opened the door she yawned; when she shut it behind her she yawned more profoundly.

"My dear Hero," she said, "so you have managed to come. Let me tell you at once that you find me in one of my most languid and unpropitiatory moods."

"Well, I don't see that that matters to me," answered Hero. "If you are tired, I suppose you cannot help yourself. Only, Lucy, I am sorry you disappointed Barbara last night."

"My dear, I could not possibly come; the heat was much too intense."

"You might have had the civility to send a telegram."

"The civility! You little puss! How dare you speak to me like that?"

"Oh, I dare to speak to you in my own way, Lucy. Rich as you are, it was very rude. 'Noblesse oblige' ought to have forced you to send a telegram."

"'Noblesse oblige!'" said Lucy.

She was dressed in the most correct fashion. There was not a single thing about her which did not denote the worldly and prosperous young woman of the present day, but with all her grand clothes and her fine airs, there was a distinction about Hero, a certain way in which she flung back her delicate neck, and a certain scornful gleam in her dark-blue eyes, which no dress and no money could ever obtain for Lucy.

The latter flopped down on the nearest chair and stared at her companion.

"Do take a seat," she said; "it irritates me to see you standing."

"I would much rather sit," said Hero. "I am tired. I have done a good morning's work already to-day. Now, then, Lucy, are you going to take me to the old lady?"

"What old lady?"

"How perfectly cruel you are!" said Hero, stamping her foot. "You know quite well what I have come about this morning; you promised to introduce

me to an old lady who, you said, would require my services as a companion, and who is going to give me a pound a week. You don't mean to say that she has found some one else?"

"Not that I know of, my dear Hero. I remember now, of course, to whom you allude—Mrs. Jennings—but she is a very disagreeable person."

"I don't mind a scrap about that."

"She is so fidgety, and so set upon her dogs. She is nearly mad on the subject of dogs."

"Ah, poor thing! I once loved a dog very dearly. What is her address, Lucy? Are you going to take me to her?"

"I cannot possibly do so this morning; I am much too dead tired. You could not expect me to tramp out in this heat?"

"Well, of course I could, because you promised," said Hero; "but if it is too much for you, and if you would prefer to write a note——"

"I should prefer it."

"Well, then, get it done. Sit down at once; here is your davenport."

"Hero, how peremptory you are!"

"I am peremptory, Lucy, because my need is peremptory. Barbara has come to the end of her resources; her fifty pounds are all spent, and nothing will induce me to allow her to touch another halfpenny of her capital. If I get a pound a week from Mrs. Jennings I can at least support myself and do something to help Barbara. You see, it is absolutely necessary that I should secure this situation. But no, of course, I forgot you cannot see—you who have more of that tiresome, sickening, worldly money than you know what to do with. Oh, a little of it is splendid, but much of it hardens the heart."

"You do talk in a strange way—you are the queerest child I ever met," said Lucy. "I will write immediately to Mrs. Jennings. Is it too much for you to hand me that blotting-pad and bottle of ink? Ah, thanks!"

Lucy wrote a short note. Hero stood by the open window and looked out.

"Do be quick!" she said at last, impatiently. "I must see Mrs. Jennings and settle up this business, and be back again at our flat in Bloomsbury in order to have Barbara's dinner ready by one o'clock. I don't suppose you ever hurried so much in all your life as I have got to do, Lucy. Ah! thank you."

"Here is the letter," said Lucy. "Mrs. Jennings lives at the other side of the square, so it won't take you long to go to her—No. 110. Just take the note. When she reads it, I think she is certain to give you an interview."

"Thank you very much, Lucy. If I get this situation I shall love you all my life, though, of course, you are not a bit my style. Now, when do you intend going to see Barbara?"

"I cannot tell you. Perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow night. Don't say anything about it; expect me when you see me. Oh, dear! this heat quite knocks me up. There is a fan on that table; will you pass it to me on your way out?"

Hero gave a large fan to Lucy, bestowed a full, puzzled glance upon her, and then left the room.

She walked quickly across the square, until at last she found herself at No. 110. Here she walked up the steps and rang the bell. There was a little delay before the door was opened, and then a tall, sallow-faced woman stood before the young girl.

"Is your mistress in?" asked Hero.

"Yes, miss; but she does not see visitors."

"Perhaps she will see me if you take her this note. It is from Miss Tregunter, who lives at the other side of the square."

"Do you mind waiting outside, miss? I have strict orders not to admit any one on account of the dogs. I will not be a moment in bringing you down my mistress' answer."

Hero said that she did not at all mind waiting on the steps.

The woman went slowly away, leaving the door slightly ajar. Hero peeped into the great, big house, which was very close, and looked dark and dismal.

After an interval of about ten minutes the servant came back.

"My mistress will see you, Miss Chevening," she said. "You need not be afraid. I have locked up the dogs."

CHAPTER XVI

THE SIX DOGS

Hero followed the woman into the deserted-looking house; the close smell seemed to take her breath away. All the windows were securely fastened down; they were dusty, too; and Hero noticed cobwebs clinging around the ledges. The woman conducted her up some carpetless stairs. They passed a shut door on the first landing, where several dogs were whining and barking loudly.

"You just stay where you are, you torments!" called out the woman at this juncture. "My poor mistress is mad on the subject of her dogs, miss; but then she has a good many other crazes, poor dear! Well, you'll soon find that out for yourself."

"How do you know that I shall?" asked Hero in some surprise.

"Of course I know what you have come about, miss. Mrs. Jennings got me to read Miss Tregunter's note aloud to her. I am sure I do hope you will suit. This is my mistress' room; you won't tell her that I have said anything, will you?"

"Certainly not," replied Hero with dignity.

The woman threw open a door on the third landing, and the little girl went in.

An old lady, considerably bowed with age, with a crabbed face and piercing black eyes, was seated in

a chair at the extreme end of the room. She was peering eagerly forward, and when Hero appeared she beckoned to her with one of her withered hands.

"Come up here close to me, my dear," she said. "Ah! I see you are quite a young girl. I am glad of that. I am so tired of middle-aged and elderly people. I believe I should be ever so much better if I had a little youth near me. You can leave us, Dawson; pray be very careful to shut the door after you."

The servant withdrew. Hero heard the dogs howling and barking in the distance.

"My dear," said the little old lady, "have the goodness to find yourself a seat; draw it up close to me so that I may have a good stare at you. If you come to me I shall have to study your face every day, and if you happen to have an inane, purposeless sort of face, with no expression, I am certain to get sick of it very soon; but if, on the contrary, you have a sparkling face, with a changing expression, why, you can quite understand, love, it will be a sort of amusement to me to watch it."

"I hope my face will please you," said Hero.

"Well, to begin with, your voice does. Now are you comfortable? Is that chair to your mind?"

"Quite, thank you," answered Hero in surprise and pleasure. The little old lady did not seem very formidable, after all.

"I hope you will be able to engage me," she continued eagerly, "for I really do want a situation so badly."

This remark, which would have sickened Lucy Tregunter, seemed to please the little woman.

"You really do?" she said. "Well, of course, that fact ought not to influence me; it ought to be quite

the other way; for girls who are in want of situations are, as a rule, worthless sort of girls. My dear, I have a maxim which I have never yet found turn out false. It is this: 'The laborer is worthy of his hire.' If you are capable of doing good work, you are certain to get good work to do. Now, you say you want a situation; therefore does not that prove that you cannot do good work?"

"By no means," answered Hero with spirit, "for every one must begin, and I never was in a situation before."

"Good gracious! Then you have not the least scrap of experience?"

"No; but if I serve you, and serve you well, you will give me experience," said Hero.

"I like that," said the little woman, "and I think you are a very honest sort of girl. You are also, I should imagine, a lady by birth."

"I think I am," replied Hero, "but I really do not much care whether I am or not."

"My dear girl, that is very wrong of you—most disrespectful to your ancestors. What is the good of having ancestors if a girl is not proud of them? In my early days nothing was thought of like family, but now, in these degenerate times, family—pooh! it is simply cast to the winds. People think of nothing but money. My dear Miss—— What did you say your name was?"

"Chevening," answered Hero.

"Chevening," said the little lady, coloring and starting. "That is a peculiar and uncommon name. I once knew some Chevenings—oh, I am not going into all that now. They could not have been relations of yours; they were very grand county people. What is your Christian name?"

"Hero—Hero Chevening."

"Hero? Heroine, you mean. Most ridiculous name in any case. But Hero is a man's name."

"I was called after one of Shakspere's heroines, and my name is Hero."

Mrs. Jennings put up both her hands to her ears.

"Don't tell me another word," she said. "I consider Shakspere's plays unfit for any pious young woman to read. I shall call you Miss Chevening, or Chevening, perhaps. I will not call you Hero unless you can positively assure me that it is a family name, and that you do not get it from Shakspere."

"I am afraid I cannot tell you that, Mrs. Jennings, for it would not be the truth."

"Well, I see you have a spirit of your own. We will let the name pass. So you really wish to come to me as my companion?"

"Provided you pay me a pound a week."

"Miss Chevening, you are what I call a very square young person; you speak out your sentiments. So you are merely coming to me for the money?"

"I am afraid that is all, Mrs. Jennings. I want the money very badly."

"You shall tell me about that afterward; it will interest me. I hope you have had experiences; I love listening to experiences, exciting ones. I should like you to tell me exactly what the pangs of real hunger are like; it will be most entertaining. Are you one of a very large family?"

"I am an only child."

"What a pity! Is your mother a seamstress, or does she take in washing?"

"I told you just now that I am a lady, and my mother is not living."

"Poor little girl! You are an orphan. Of course

I ought to be kind to you. Now, however, I think I have questioned you enough. You are poor, and would like to come to me because you wish to earn a pound a week. Don't you think fifteen shillings would be enough, particularly as you have had no experience?"

"I could not come for less than a pound a week," answered Hero. "I could not manage with less. If you can give me that I will come to you and do my very utmost to please you; but if you cannot, why——"

"You will reject the situation?" said Mrs. Jennings, nodding her head, and fixing her black eyes very keenly upon Hero's face. "Well, child, don't be alarmed. If you suit me in other ways, five shillings extra will not ruin me. If you come to me, your duties will be very plain. You will sit in this room with me the greater part of the day. You and I will have our meals together, and if the weather is suitable, go out for an airing. We shall also, from morning to night, have the dogs with us. And now, Miss Chevening, that brings me to a most important question. Are you devoted to animals?"

Hero stared very hard back at Mrs. Jennings. Mrs. Jennings fixed her piercing black eyes on the young girl's face.

"Once," said Hero slowly, "I had a dog; he was my best friend—his name was Frisk. He was caught in a trap and broke his leg badly, and had to be shot. When I left my home in the country I also left my dear dog's grave behind me."

"Poor, poor child! What an appalling affliction!" Mrs. Jennings laid her withered hand on Hero's slender little arm. "Well," she said, "if you come to me you will meet dogs small, dogs of medium size,

and one big dog. I keep six dogs, my love. They are my true companions, they are the real solace of my life. Do you think you could bear with them? Do you think you could be kind to them? Do you think you could put up with their whims?"

"I love dogs," said Hero.

"Then that settles it," answered Mrs. Jennings. "If you love dogs, and they take to you, you shall come to me to-morrow morning. But, first of all, I must put you to the test. I must send for the dogs, and find out if they take to you."

"And you will really give me wages of a pound a week?"

"I will really give you a pound a week, you pertinacious, greedy child. It is a frightful lot of money, and I don't know what Dawson will say; it will almost ruin me—but still, I like your voice, and I like your manner. Now I will begin to describe your duties. You must be with me, Miss Chevening, every morning sharp at nine o'clock. We will then give the dogs their breakfast and have our own. After breakfast you must go out into the park with the dogs for an hour. They will be fastened to leashes, and you will lead them. On very, very fine days I will accompany you, leaning on your arm, my dear. At the end of the hour of exercise you and the dogs will come back, and then you will read aloud to me. I never care for any literature which does not describe the canine race, but I have invested in several large books on the subject, and a most interesting article on the dog has lately appeared in the 'Encyclopædia Britannica,' which I want you to read also to me, and to write out extracts from. As a rule, a veterinary surgeon arrives once a week to see that my darlings are in perfect health and to order their diet.

The difficulty with dogs, as I dare say you know, is to give them enough exercise, and to prevent their accumulating fat; at the same time the tenderest petting and love are absolutely necessary to draw out the dear creatures. Dogs have wonderful characters, my dear Miss Chevening; you will find that out when you have been long with me. In the afternoon you will take the dogs for another walk, and come back again and read aloud to me. Some days I shall have to send you to Mudie's. I have a subscription always running at Mudie's, and I ask them week after week the invariable question, 'Has a new dog story appeared?' If it has, I read it in Mudie's book first, and then I buy it and put it away on my bookshelf. When Mudie has no fresh dog story to recommend to me, I read the old ones, or rather my companion reads them aloud to me. Now, Dawson has become most unpleasant of late, and I have had one or two girls in as companions, and they have absolutely laughed at the dogs. I have seen them doing it when they imagined my back was turned. My dear, I am a lonely, desolate woman, and the dogs do not get the attention they require. Should one of my treasures be snatched from me, I should—yes, Miss Chevening, it would be the death of me—I should die. After tea your time is generally occupied in needlework for the dogs."

"Needlework for the dogs? I don't quite understand," said Hero.

"You will when you come here. I have an Italian greyhound, and he requires a new dress each winter. Just at present, in the hot weather, he goes without. Then my dear little pug, Chip, has coats which he wears from October until the middle of May. Oh, yes, there is plenty to be done, and I like to study

the fashion, and to find out what other ladies do with their dogs; and if there is an exhibition of dogs anywhere, you have, of course, to go and report to me. In short, your life is taken up looking after the comforts of my dear children, as I term them."

"Well," answered Hero with a sigh, "I never did know that Frisk was to be returned to me in this wholesale manner, but, of course, I think I shall be able to manage. It cannot be very difficult, surely, to earn a pound a week by making you happy and looking after the dogs."

"If you think so, would you not try to come for fifteen shillings?"

"Certainly not! I want my pound a week, and you are not to give me a penny less."

"Very well. I can see that you are a troublesome, determined sort of child; but somehow I fancy you. Now, then, please ring for Dawson, and the dogs shall come upstairs. It all depends, I may as well tell you frankly, on whether they take to you or not."

Hero walked across the room and rang the bell.

"How old are you, by the way, my love?" asked the little old lady as she watched her.

"Very nearly sixteen," answered Hero.

"Good heavens! Sixteen!" cried old Mrs. Jennings. "I can't even remember when I was sixteen. It must be very nice to be so infantilely young."

"I expect each time of life has its trials," said Hero somewhat tartly. "I hope your servant, Dawson, will soon answer the bell, for I must be home, whatever happens, before one o'clock to-day."

"I perceive that you are a determined young woman. Ring the bell again, loudly. Dawson often grumbles at coming up so many stairs; it is ridicu-

lous of her to complain, for she is only seventy years old. Now, I am over eighty, and have scarcely an ache. Ah! here she comes. Dawson, I think I have at last found a suitable young person to look after the dogs and myself. Will you please open the door downstairs and send the darlings up?"

"I wish you joy of the post, I am sure, miss," said Dawson, looking full at Hero. "You had better stand a little away from the door, or the big dog, Duke, will knock you down."

Hero crossed the room and sat down again on the little chair near Mrs. Jennings.

Dawson stumbled downstairs. A door on the next landing but one was opened immediately. Afterward there came a great clattering and rushing, the sound of swift, four-footed beings rushing upstairs, then a confused mass of quadrupeds entered the room.

They all made straight, not for Mrs. Jennings, but for Hero Chevening. There was a big dog of the collie species, with a coat considerably injured through much neglect and want of exercise.

"That is Duke, dear, dear Duke. Come to me, Duke," said Mrs. Jennings.

Duke did not take the least notice of his mistress; he was busily employed sniffing Hero all over. Finally, he began to leap up and to lick her face.

"Down, Duke! Behave yourself!" said the young girl in a firm voice.

The dog stared at her in astonishment, and dropped his paws.

"And this is Chip," said Mrs. Jennings, who was standing up in her excitement. "What do you think of my sweet little Chip? Is not he a perfect pug? And this is my little Pet, the greyhound for whom

you are to make the coat when the cold weather comes."

"I much prefer Duke," said Hero. "Oh! and this is a nice little Scotch terrier!" she continued, as a little black dog, with a very big head, pointed ears, and crooked legs, waddled up to her side.

"I should think you did love that darling—his name is Bounce—he came straight from the Highlands. Bounce, what do you think of your new friend? My dear, I must not say 'mistress,' for I am mistress. You and the dogs are friends—equals, in short."

"Scarcely equals at present," said Hero. "I am very much beneath the dogs, it seems to me."

"Well, my love, I must frankly say that I do not think any human being comes up to the dog in intelligence and faithfulness."

A black Spitz puppy called Demon, and a fox terrier of the name of Jakes, also made their appearance. The whole six surrounded Hero, sniffing at her dress, trying to worm their way to her ankles, examining her all around in a most thorough and searching manner. Finally, as she lowered one of her hands, the big dog, Duke, condescended to lick it.

"They have taken to you!" cried Mrs. Jennings, clapping her hands. "That settles the matter. You will be with me at nine o'clock sharp to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER XVII

TEMPTATION

Since Barbara Underhill had come to London she had found out a great many unpleasant truths. In the first place, her own appalling ignorance started up and stared her in the face. She discovered only too quickly that she knew nothing well. She had, it is true, a slight smattering of many subjects, but there was no one single thing which she could do better than any one else. She was very painfully young, too. A girl does not often complain of her youth, but Barbara, at sixteen, earnestly wished that she was eighteen or nineteen. Her youth made her gauche, and gauche girls have a hard time of it in this censorious world. She had no one, too, to advise her; there was no friend older and wiser than herself to direct her little ambitions in any way. Were it not for Hero, she would have succumbed utterly. There was a very unexpected weight on her conscience, which made itself felt more day by day and hour by hour. Often she used to wake at night to find her pillow wetted by tears. At these times she longed passionately, beyond words to express, for Rosamond. She longed once more to feel Clementcy's soft arms around her neck, to hear Ursula's gentle, purring voice saying soft nothings in her ears. She looked back, at these times, with envy

to the bird's-nest bedroom, to the refreshing, wholesome food, to the fresh air, the flowers, the fruit of the farm. She repented of having left her home so suddenly, but as yet she had no wish to return to the old life. There was still the hope of success—the hope of making the whole thing a grand triumph—which lured her forward like a will-o'-the-wisp.

One of the first of Barbara's discoveries had been the very unpleasant fact that money in London, particularly when one is inexperienced, goes four times as fast as one expects it to go. Before she started for town, fifty pounds had seemed to her simply an inexhaustible sum; but when she had furnished the little flat and got a few necessary clothes for herself and Hero, and week by week had to supply the small amount of food which the two girls were obliged to eat, that fifty pounds dwindled and dwindled, until at last very little was left. On the day when Hero had gone secretly to see Lucy Tregunter, and when Barbara had started off for her daily visit to the British Museum, she knew that only two golden sovereigns out of the fifty which she had brought to London remained in her purse.

"And when they are gone, what is to become of us?" she reflected. "If I am forced to write to Mr. Johnson, I shall have, in the first place, to acquaint him with my address; in the next, to let him know that I have more or less failed; and in the third place, I shall be obliged to draw some of the two hundred pounds, which is all the money I now possess in the world. No, I am determined not to write for any more money. Oh! if only I could succeed! If only—only——"

Here her cheeks flamed with brilliant color, and her large, beautiful eyes grew full of light, for poor,

ambitious, ignorant little Barbara was busily engaged writing a book. She had always had a great taste for literature, and a certain facility for writing, but she knew very little of the subject over which she was now engaged. The ways of the literary world, too, were as a sealed volume to her. It was, however, just her very ignorance which made her bold. She thought, when once her book was finished, that she would have courage to take it to a publisher; that perhaps the publisher would be kind, perhaps he would recognize her latent talent, perhaps he would bring her book out, and perhaps—oh, perhaps, that book might become the talk of the great London world! If so, all would be well.

Day after day she went to her special desk in the reading-room of the British Museum, where she worked hard from morning till night.

This morning she went, as usual, to her accustomed seat. She ordered her books of reference to be brought to her, and set to work. She was now nearing the end of the book. It was her wish, her determination, to make the end very striking; but think as she would, no really important dénouement had occurred to her. She thought this anxious matter over during many wakeful hours. She felt that all really depended upon the end. The beginning of her story was, according to her own ideas, simple and striking enough, and if she could invent a really important wind-up, it was quite possible that a publisher would accept the book and pay for it; and if so, her fortune would be made: the book would be reviewed, the book would sell, orders for work would come to her. She would be looked upon as one of the child prodigies of the day, the girl-author who had

brought out her first book before she was seventeen. Barbara's eyes actually blazed at the thought.

"If only this can come to pass," she said to herself, "then what I have done will be well done. Then dear Rosamond will forgive me the pain I have caused her, and Ursula and Clemency will once again consider me the best sister in the world. I shall spend all my life in trying to make up for the three months of misery I have caused them. Oh, I must finish the book worthily! I must, and I will!"

On this particular day she sat with her manuscript spread before her, her pen well dipped in the ink, one of her hands supporting her cheek, staring down at the empty page.

She had got her heroine into the necessary dilemma, but how to get her out again was the puzzle. All the proper ingredients for the well-known girls' novel she had collected together. Here, in short, was her cake, that cake which was to make her fortune, but where was the leaven which was to harmonize the whole? If only she could strengthen her leading idea, if only she could make her climax strong and worthy of herself!

Barbara, who was rather shy when she first went to the Museum, had chosen her place amongst those desks which are devoted to ladies only. For the last few weeks a little woman, with gray hair, a high forehead, and large, dreamy eyes, had sat next to her. The little woman had come day after day, and employed her time looking up books of reference, taking down copious notes, and finally writing something in a neat hand on many sheets of paper. She must have been over fifty years of age; her face was strong, and somewhat nervous; she had large hands; she worked very hard. Now and then her big eyes used to look

at Barbara as if she did not see her, as if she were looking through her at something else. Barbara used to resent these glances, and yet she used to watch the little lady in gray with a sort of fascinated interest. Her work excited her curiosity; she wondered what she could possibly be doing in the original line.

Just before lunch time on this special day the little lady, in stretching across her hand to secure a fresh piece of paper, suddenly dropped a pile of writing on the floor. Barbara stooped to pick it up, and handed it back to her. The lady said "Thank you" in a hasty manner, but as a friend came up at that moment to speak to her, she did not say any more to Barbara. They stood at a little distance, talking together in a semi-whisper.

Barbara returned, more disconsolate than ever, to her own work. Suddenly she looked up with a sigh of relief—the great clock struck one. She resolved that she would not go home to dinner; it did not matter whether she disappointed Hero or not. She would go off to the refreshment buffet, have a cup of coffee and a roll, and then return to her work. She was more and more determined that, come what would, this day should not turn out a failure. She half rose to leave her desk, when, turning around, she perceived that the lady who used to sit at her left hand had vanished; her pile of papers lay close to Barbara, in hopeless confusion. Without meaning to do so, Barbara's eager eyes lighted upon a certain sentence. Before she was aware of the fact, she had read the whole of one page of manuscript. Then she started, colored violently and sprang to her feet. She felt guilty and uncomfortable. Without intending to do so, she had possessed herself of the little woman's secret. She also was writing a novel. In strong, pun-

gent phrases she was going to give forth to the world some original ideas. Without intending it, Barbara had obtained just the dénouement she wanted for her own book. Of course she ought not to use it; it was not hers; it belonged to the little lady.

She shut up her own manuscript pages, put a book over them to keep them in their place, and hurried off to the refreshment buffet. There she drank her coffee and had a roll, scarcely conscious of the taste of the food, her anxiety being to hurry back to her own work. Her fingers tingled, her head ached, her eyes shone.

Barbara was absent from her desk half an hour. She sat down again, and again tried to write.

"Of course I have not an idea of using that thought," she said to herself. "I must not think of such a thing, but would it not fit just perfectly? Oh, if I could only twist it around and make it my own, and use it in such a way that she would never recognize it! Perhaps, too, her book will never come out; perhaps she is quite a nobody—she is old, she has nearly lived her life, and I—oh, it is so important for me to succeed! Oh, dear! that thought is exactly what I want; it would simply make my book. I wish now I had not read that page of manuscript. The thought she has expressed—she expressed it very well, too—it quite haunts me; I can think of nothing else."

Barbara suddenly found that she could do no more writing that day. She sighed, pressed her hand to her forehead, collected her manuscript, slipped it into her portfolio, and went home to the little flat. In the flat she found Hero, her eyes shining, her cheeks bright, anxiously waiting for her.

"Dear me, Barbara!" she exclaimed, "what have

you been doing to yourself? I had such a nice dinner ready for you! Why did you not come home to eat it?"

"I was very busy, and had lunch at the refreshment buffet," said Barbara.

"What a pity!"

"Well, Hero, don't grumble. If you really knew what hard work meant——"

"Well, I expect I shall in future," answered Hero. "Barbara, do sit down, and don't look so cross! I have got real news for you at last—great news."

"News!" said Barbara, turning pale. "Have you heard from Rosamond?"

"Of course not. How can I hear from poor Rose when she does not know our address? By the way, have you written to her yet?"

"Not yet. My head ached so badly last night I could not write; it is beginning to ache again now."

"You poor dear! You have been overworking yourself, as usual," said Hero.

"Oh, I don't know, Hero. I must work, the money is getting so low."

"Tell me all about the money," said Hero in a very tender, sympathetic voice.

"I am afraid I must, although I did not want to worry you. We have exactly two unbroken sovereigns left."

"Two whole sovereigns! I was afraid you were going to say two shillings. Oh, then we shall manage splendidly. Bab, you must congratulate me."

"What about?" answered Barbara impatiently. "I don't feel in the mood to congratulate any one just now."

"Well, rouse yourself for the occasion. I have got a situation."

"A situation! Hero, what do you mean?"

"A real, bonâ fide situation. What do you think I have got to do?"

"I cannot possibly guess."

"Poor Babs! You do look seedy. Well, my dear, I will tell you. To-morrow morning I am going to take care of a dear old lady. Her name is Mrs. Jennings. I like her very much, and I think she likes me. I have got to look after her all day long, and also to look after her six dogs."

"My dear, you must be joking."

"No, darling, I am speaking the words of sober truth. I am to be the caretaker of the old lady and her dogs. Picture me morning by morning, Mrs. Jennings leaning on my arm, six dogs in leashes at my other side. Shall I describe the dear creatures to you? First of all, there comes a collie—a great, big, unkempt creature—but with such melting eyes and such a rough coat. His name is Duke. Then there is a pug with a very curly tail and a very short nose, called Chip. He is to have a jacket in the winter, cut fashionably. I am to make it for him before the cold weather sets in. Next on the list comes a little Scotch terrier, with a big head and crooked legs. His name is Bounce. Then a disagreeable little Italian greyhound. Oh, by the way! he is also to wear a dress in the winter. His name is Pet. Then a black Spitz puppy, called Demon; and a fox terrier—a great beauty—Jakes. Now, Barbara, please let me say the names over again to you, for I must have them at my finger-tips to-morrow morning—Duke, Chip, Bounce, Pet, Demon, Jakes. Don't you think I am a lucky girl?"

"I think you must have taken leave of your senses," answered Barbara. "How could you possibly under-

take anything so utterly ridiculous? You to go about with an old lady, and six dogs in leashes?"

"Yes; that will be my delightful duty in the future. I shall have to prepare your meals over night, for I must be absent all day. I am to be with my dear little old lady at nine in the morning. She did not mention at what hour I was to leave her, but I presume it will be rather late."

"But how did you hear of this extraordinary woman?" said Barbara.

"Well, you know, Barbara," answered Hero, "you have always grumbled at Lucy Tregunter, but I have never thought her half a bad sort. I am a girl full of theories, and my theory is that Lucy has got a character of her own, and that she simply lives up to it. She will help you if you take her in the right way. Now I consulted her a short time ago, and said it was necessary, really necessary, for me to earn money, and she suddenly remembered Mrs. Jennings, and sent me to her this morning with a letter of introduction. Well, I saw the dear old lady—she is over eighty years of age, and keeps a servant who is seventy. She has six dogs, and lives in a very big house, the greater part of which is shut up. What with looking after her and her dogs, I shall be busy enough."

"Oh, Hero! How will you be able to stand the life?"

"Wait a moment, I have something more to tell you. I am not going to do all this for nothing. What salary do you think I shall receive?"

"Salary!" answered Barbara, raising her eyes and looking wearily at her friend, "I am sure I cannot guess."

"Well, then, you may open your eyes a bit wider,

for it is something stupendous. A whole pound a week! Quite sufficient to support two humble little beings like you and me, more particularly as I shall get almost all my meals with Mrs. Jennings."

"Hero! A pound a week! You don't mean it?"

"I do, my love. I am to receive a whole solid pound sterling per week. Just think of it! After all, I do think my mission in life is to look after dogs, and the whole six took to me wonderfully this morning."

CHAPTER XVIII

YIELDING

After talking a little longer with Hero, Barbara went away into her own bedroom, locked the door, and spread her pile of manuscript before her. Hero's news had slightly cheered her; her headache was better. It was now possible to live; she need not write to Mr. Johnson for more money, and it might be better to keep Rosamond in the dark with regard to her whereabouts for another fortnight.

"Long before then the book will be finished, and success may be mine," thought the young girl to herself.

In unrolling her papers now, Barbara, to her great astonishment, perceived that there was one page among the others written in a different handwriting. She started, and looked at it eagerly.

"What have I done?" she exclaimed half aloud. "I have absolutely, without the least intending it, taken away a page of the lady's manuscript. Poor thing! What a state she will be in! How did it get mixed up with mine? I can only suppose that at the time when the manuscript was knocked over this page was pushed on to my table. It is extraordinary. I am sorry. Shall I go back to the Museum and return it to her? But no, there will be no use in that, for she never goes in the afternoon. I will take it back to-morrow morning."

Barbara put the page carefully on one side, and dipping her pen in the ink, went on with her story.

She wrote slowly. There were times when her ideas seemed to flow, but there were many times, again, when they undoubtedly dragged. This was one of the days when they dragged. She was approaching the crucial part of her book—the crisis—the imminent crisis was on her, and she had no crisis to describe. As she thought, and puzzled, and struggled with her subject, once more there swept over her memory the remembrance of the page she had read of the little lady's story. There, indeed, was a striking dénouement, an effective situation. The terse, well-chosen sentences, the ideas so fresh, so invigorating, so daring, seemed to be stereotyped on Barbara's brain. She could think of nothing else. The strange, inexplicable thing, too, was that the thoughts which the lady had used fitted Barbara's own story just as admirably as if she had worked them out herself from the first.

"Oh! if I could but use those thoughts!" she groaned. "Oh, why was this terrible temptation sent to me? Have I not heard it said, over and over again, that ideas float in the air? that if one person gets a new idea, another person is almost certain to be inspired by it at the same time? Suppose I use that great thought; suppose I partly use it. Suppose I work up my own story in something the same way. Would she know? Is she ever likely to know?"

Then Barbara sprang from her desk and began to walk up and down the little room.

"What a mean, horrid girl I am!" she said to herself in angry tones. "When I left the farm, and Rosamond, and Ursula, and Clemency, did I ever think I should come to this? Oh, dear! why did I

read that page of manuscript? Why did I bring away another page with me? Well, at least, I vow and declare I won't read that. I must give it back to the lady in the morning, and apologize, oh, so humbly! But what shall I do to finish my own story? What shall I do?"

The girls lived at the very top of the house, and the noise from the street below floated up, rendered soft and harmonious by the distance. Presently, Barbara put her head out of her window and peeped out. How far down the street looked! How small and insignificant the people seemed as they hurried to and fro! But oh! how hot the air was! How she longed and pined for a breath of the country freshness! Why did her head begin to ache again so badly? Oh, she knew the reason well; her story would not proceed; that dreadful plot would not unfold itself. She dug her hands angrily into her hair.

"I am determined to finish that story to-day!" she cried.

She sat down again before her desk.

"But I will not be mean," she continued. "I will not use what does not belong to me; I will finish the story in my own way—I will! I will!"

But she had scarcely uttered that vigorous "I will!" before her eyes fell upon the page of manuscript which she had taken from the lady who was her next-door neighbor at the Museum. As if fascinated, as if some power outside herself was impelling her, she began to read. The very first sentence arrested her attention. She found, partly to her consternation, partly with a sort of wild delight, that the page she was now reading was a continuation of the page which she had inadvertently read at the

Museum. It contained a further development of the striking plot, which gave Barbara the necessary clew.

Before she knew well what she was doing, her pen began to move, bright spots grew on her cheeks, her eyes danced, her story proceeded; it went well.

"I am scarcely using the plot," she said to herself. "The lady just gave me a hint. I am working on certain lines, but they are my own—oh, yes, they are my own. I am not indebted to her. I would not take a word of hers, not for the world. It is only, only——" She did not dare to finish the sentence, even to herself.

Presently Hero burst open the door; she looked fresh and bright.

"Babs," she said, "I cannot permit this for another moment. Tea is ready, and afterward you are to come for a walk. You will kill yourself if you work like this."

"I have just done," said Barbara. She finished the last word on her sheet with a blot. Her fingers were shaking, the glow of delight was still on her cheeks, the sparkle was still in her big eyes.

She hurriedly thrust all her writing materials into her desk, poured out some cold water, bathed her face and hands, brushed her hair, and then entered the tiny sitting-room.

"Hero," she said, "congratulate me."

"What about, Barbara? Oh! you really look well. What has happened? Have you good news?"

"I have very good news—very good. I have finished my book."

"Your book? Do you mean to say you have written a book?"

"Yes. I should like to read some of it to you. Would you care to listen?"

"Care to listen, Barbara? What do you take me for? Oh, Barbara, you are a genius! Let us go up to the leads after tea; you can begin the story to me there."

The girls sat down before their little table. Barbara now ate heartily. A load seemed to be lifted from her mind. She quite forgot the little lady in gray. Her book was finished, and she had forced herself to consider the work entirely her own.

Hero began to talk of her duties on the following morning, and Barbara entered into the subject with spirit.

"I shall not be anxious about money matters now," she said. "Hero, you really are a great help to me. I am going to offer my book to a publisher, and if he accepts it, of course we shall have money, and then between my earnings and yours we shall get along finely."

"Oh, yes, splendidly," answered Hero.

"I feel that the worst is over," continued Barbara, "now that the book is finished."

"I guessed you were writing it, of course," said Hero, "but I was too proud to ask you, as you would not tell me. I expect it will be a splendid book. Of course I always knew you were clever, Barbara. I am delighted—I am proud of you. I wonder what Lucy Tregunter will say when all the world is talking of your book?"

"All the world won't talk of it," said Barbara; but at the same time she smiled, and her dark eyes looked brighter and happier than ever.

CHAPTER XIX

PAGE FORTY-EIGHT

The next day Hero hurried off at an early hour to Mrs. Jennings' house in Eaton Square, and Barbara went, as usual, to the British Museum. She had slept soundly the night before, and was still in excellent spirits. She carried her precious manuscript in a roll under her arm. It was finished at last; the thought of the finished book filled her with joy. As yet, there were no prickings of conscience. She scarcely realized that she had robbed another of a very precious possession. She expected to be busy to-day, as she meant to look through page after page of the finished book. She was going to search up all her references, to verify all her facts. She was a daring girl, and she had introduced into her pages a very neat little scientific theory, and this required careful elaboration. People should not attribute youthful mistakes to the book; if possible, people should be puzzled over the sex of the author. Yes, Barbara felt, now the conclusion was so strong and emphatic, that the book would be sufficiently remarkable to arrest attention. On its fate it seemed to her that her whole future life hung. Before she left her rooms that morning her eyes had fallen on the page of manuscript which belonged to the little lady. Her first intention was to roll it up in order

to take it back to her; but on second thoughts she determined to burn it.

The lady must never know that it had passed through her hands.

No sooner had the idea come to her than she acted on it; she crumpled up the piece of paper and thrust it into the stove.

When she seated herself at her accustomed desk the first person she saw was the little lady. She was bending forward, busily writing. When she saw Barbara she made a gentle inclination of her head, and then, sweeping aside her skirt to make room for the young girl, turned and addressed her.

"You will forgive me?" she said.

"Certainly," replied Barbara.

"You picked up some sheets of manuscript for me yesterday."

"I remember," replied Barbara.

"Well, it is very tiresome, but I cannot find page forty-eight. Now it happened to be rather an important page of the work over which I am engaged. You did not by any chance see it?"

"Page forty-eight!" said Barbara. "Have you really lost it?"

"Yes. You are quite sure you did not see it?"

"Quite sure," answered Barbara. She did not get red, but white—chalky white. She had never before told a deliberate lie.

The little lady did not say anything further. With a very faint sigh she resumed her work. Barbara bent over her own work.

"Now, if I am weak and stupid, I shall begin to feel remorse," she said to herself. "I dare not do that—my book is finished. Yes, the lady's thought did help me; but it only helped me; the words are

mine. Perhaps that little woman will never be able to have her book published. She looks an insignificant person."

She glanced again at her neighbor.

"At the worst, she will easily be able to make a second copy of page forty-eight," murmured Barbara to herself. "Yes, it was horrid to have to tell that lie, but there was no help for it."

At this moment one of the clerks of the reading-room came up to Barbara, and told her that the superintendent would be glad to speak to her.

Mr. Mason had already taken a good deal of trouble for Barbara. She left her place, and went eagerly to the center desk. He bent forward, and began to talk in an interested tone.

"You have not come for my help for some days," he said. "How is your story getting on?"

"It is finished," answered the young girl; "I finished it last night."

"I am glad of that; let me congratulate you. Now that it is finished, what do you intend to do with it?"

"To publish it, if I can." Then Barbara raised her eyes. "What do you advise?" she asked.

Mr. Mason was silent. He had taken an interest in Barbara from the first. She was so young, so naïve; her face, also, was so full of intelligence; there was such a downright, determined air about her that she had awakened his enthusiasm. He was the kindest of men, and had helped more than one young author to take his or her first step up the thorny ladder of literature.

"I will do what I do not do for many," he said after a pause, "I will look over your manuscript myself. Bring it to me at once, for I have an hour or two at my disposal. My advice to you is, if possible,

to run the story through a magazine; you will earn far more money in that way than you are likely to make for many a long day with a book. Your story will be read by all the readers of the magazine, and in that way your name will begin to get circulated. Of course, it is only fair to tell you that as you are very young and inexperienced, the chances are that your manuscript may not be worth a great deal. That does not mean that you will not write some day, but it means that your first effort may not succeed. I will tell you, however, what I will do. I will read what you have written, and if I find it fairly satisfactory I will give you an introduction to a friend of mine who is about to start a new monthly. He intends to use the most original contributions he can get. What he principally wants is talent, originality. Now bring me the manuscript at once. I can give you my opinion to-morrow."

"Shall I alter it first?" said Barbara. "I was correcting it when you sent for me."

"No; let me see it just as it is; I am not going to read every word of it. I will just take in the main idea."

Barbara ran off to her desk. She gathered up her manuscript and brought it back to Mr. Mason.

"Come to me to-morrow at this hour for my opinion," he said.

Soon afterward the clock struck one, and Barbara Underhill, with several other ladies, went into the refreshment buffet. She had just been helped to a cup of coffee, and was attacking her roll with appetite, when she heard a voice speaking close to her. She raised her head with a start, and saw that her friend of the reading-room had secured a seat at the same table.

"I am interested in you," said the gray lady in her clear voice. "You are very young to write. Forgive me if I ask you a question—are you writing for publication?"

"I am trying to," replied Barbara.

"You are such a child," said the lady.

"I am not so young as I look," answered Barbara with some asperity. "I shall be seventeen my next birthday."

The little lady smiled; her dreamy eyes seemed to wake up and to look full into Barbara's.

"My dear," she said then, "seventeen is very young. I, who am over fifty, think your present age quite that of a child. I admire your pluck, however, and I earnestly hope that you will succeed. I saw you talking to Mr. Mason. If any one can help you, he can. I also——" Here she hesitated, and even slightly colored.

"She, of all people, must not help me," thought Barbara to herself. "No, I cannot stand that; I draw the line at that."

The little lady had been gazing at her very intently; a sudden sense of embarrassment seized Barbara. She spoke impulsively, plunging into the last words she would have said in cooler moments.

"I hope you will find page forty-eight," she said. "I hope you can remember what you said on that page."

The lady raised her eyebrows in slight surprise, and after another pause spoke with dignity.

"Thank you," she replied. "I have rewritten the page already; the loss did not matter in the least."

A gentleman came up at that moment to speak to her, and she did not address Barbara again.

Barbara left the Museum as soon as she had swallowed her coffee.

The next day, at an early hour, Mr. Mason sent to speak to her.

"I have read your story," he said, putting the manuscript back into her hands. "I have read it from the first page to the last. It is full of faults—the faults which all young writers must necessarily commit. The earlier portion is in no way above the average writing of a clever girl, but the end, Miss Underhill, the end atones for all; the end surprises me very much—it is thoughtful, beyond your years. If you go as you have begun, you will do well. Some day you will even be a great writer. I am giving you, with great pleasure, a note to my special friend, Mr. Parkinson. Parkinson, the publisher, is one of the best friends to really clever young writers in the whole of London. Take this manuscript, with my note, to him. He will read what you have written after he has read the note."

"I do not know how to thank you," answered Barbara. Her face was white, there was a queer, excited beating at her heart. She earnestly wished that Mr. Mason had praised the early part of the manuscript.

He held out his hand to her.

"Go at once," he said, "you have no time to lose. Parkinson is bringing out a new monthly, and your story may suit him."

She left the great reading-room without glancing at any one, a queer, triumphant glow in her eyes, her cheeks on fire.

Oh, surely, success—the great success which she had achieved—was worth the little deceit, the lie, the robbing of another of a noble thought!

CHAPTER XX

JEFFERSON'S MISTAKE

Mr. Parkinson's office was in Cheapside. By this time Barbara knew her way about the principal thoroughfares of London. As soon as ever she left the Museum she walked quickly down Museum Street, hailed an omnibus, and asked the man to put her down at the number which Mr. Mason had indicated on his letter of introduction. Then she sat back against the well-worn velvet cushions and tried to control the overanxious beating of her heart.

Her thoughts were in a whirl; she could not concentrate them on any one thing. She felt dazzled, excited; she was exercising a great grip over herself, for she was determined, at all costs, to keep remorse at bay.

The drive was a short one, and presently the conductor pulled up the omnibus and pointed out to her Mr. Parkinson's address at the opposite side of the street. She soon crossed the busy thoroughfare and looked at the names on the brass plate at the door. Mr. Parkinson's editorial offices occupied the whole of the second floor. Barbara went up and up the brass-bound stairs. It seemed to her as if she could never reach the top. At last, slightly out of breath, she paused; she saw the name of the publisher, in aggressive white paint, on a door. There was a

knocker to the door and a bell at one side. She pressed the bell and raised the knocker. After a moment's delay a sandy-haired, impertinent-looking boy stood before her.

"Yes, miss?" he said, staring at Barbara from top to toe. Her dress, which only reached a little below her ankles, her shabby black hat, her flushed cheeks, the roll of manuscript under her arm, all told this experienced boy a tale.

"I know her sort," he murmured under his breath. "She is one of them silly young persons who bring manuscripts that nobody wants to read."

"Yes, miss?" he said again, and his tone was a little more aggressive than when he first spoke.

"Is Mr. Parkinson in?" asked Barbara.

"In, miss? Yes, but particular engaged. He don't see no one except by appointment."

Barbara looked disappointed for the space of a moment; then she said abruptly:

"I have a letter of introduction for Mr. Parkinson. Will you please take it to him, and ask him when he can see me?"

The boy stared at the writing on the envelope which Barbara gave him, gazed back again at her very intently, stuck his tongue in his cheek, and turned on his heel. When he was half way across the room he turned back and spoke to Barbara.

"You can take a chair, if you like," he said. He then vanished into the inner sanctum of the office. He was away for a couple of minutes. When he came back his tone was more respectful.

"Mr. Parkinson will see you if you wait for a little time," he said.

"Yes, I will wait," replied Barbara. She seated herself now quite comfortably and firmly on her

chair. She felt that she had won a victory over the impertinent office boy, and nothing else just then seemed of moment.

She had to wait for about a quarter of an hour; then a red-haired, burly-looking man came out. He rushed out of the inner room, thrusting his hand through his hair as he did so. He said something to the boy, seized his hat, and ran downstairs.

"He is a great gun, he is," said the boy, nodding at Barbara as he spoke.

"Who is?" asked Barbara.

"Why, that gent that has just gone out. He is Mr. ——"

Before he could say the word a whistle sounded within. The boy thrust his tongue into his cheek and vanished, but soon came back and nodded to Barbara.

"Follow me this way, please, miss," he said.

The next instant Barbara found herself in the editor's room. It was a large room, comfortably furnished. There were venetian blinds to the windows, which were down at present, for the afternoon sun was pouring into the room. A dark-haired, thin-faced man, with large, luminous eyes, and a particularly intelligent face, partly rose when he saw her.

Barbara came timidly forward. He held out his hand.

"You are Miss Underhill, I understand," he said. "I have just read Mr. Mason's note. Will you seat yourself there, please?"

Barbara did so. She was trembling a good deal. The crucial moment had indeed arrived.

Mr. Parkinson, after first favoring her with a long and penetrating glance, once again read the letter which Mr. Mason had written to him.

"Mason praises your work," he said. "He tells me that it has extraordinary merits; but surely you are little better than a child?"

"I am not a child," answered Barbara in some impatience; "I am sixteen years old. Some girls are not childish at sixteen," she added.

Mr. Parkinson allowed himself to indulge in the ghost of a smile.

"You look a child," he said, "and I am glad of it. It is a great pity to lose our childhood oversoon—we never get it back again. Have you brought your manuscript with you?"

"Yes, sir; here it is," said Barbara. She laid the precious roll on the large office table. Mr. Parkinson took it up in his hand, untied the string, and glanced for a moment at the title-page. "I think your name has been used before," he said, "but that matter can be easily altered. How many words does this manuscript contain?"

"I don't know, sir; I have not counted them," said Barbara.

Mr. Parkinson glanced an experienced eye over the closely written pages.

"There are, I should say, about forty thousand words here," he said after a pause; "quite too short for an ordinary book, as you are doubtless aware. Still, it might be brought out at two-and-six, or it might run—that is, if it is sufficiently good—through a few numbers of a magazine. I am about to bring out a magazine on quite new lines next November. Your manuscript, if it is original, and my friend gives me to understand that it is, may possibly suit my purpose, but it must have originality, daring and strength. It is scarcely likely that one so yo——" He again glanced at Barbara, and a puzzled expres-

sion came between his brows. "It is extremely doubtful, notwithstanding my friend's praise, that this story will suit me," he said. "I will, however, promise to read it through carefully. Will you call again this day week?"

"Thank you," answered Barbara. She rose tremblingly; her knees shook under her.

Mr. Parkinson also rose from his seat.

"Don't work too hard," he said, "and don't forget that you are quite a child, even though you are sixteen years of age."

She left him, feeling crushed.

"How formidable everything is when you come close to it," she reflected. "How am I to compete with grown men and women—men and women who really know life? That awful editor seemed to take the last ghost of hope out of me. How am I to endure the suspense until this day week?"

She went home, but could not settle to anything. She missed Hero, whose bright face and cheerful words had always given her a certain amount of courage. Her thoughts would revert to her sisters. She longed to see them again; they became more precious to her now that they were absent. The Gables did not seem an uninteresting place now that she no longer dwelt there. She even turned with thoughts of affection to her little bird's-nest bedroom. She paced up and down the tiny flat. She had to wait a whole week, and at the end of the week failure might be hers; if so, how was she to endure it?

But the present suspense was the hardest of all to endure. She had now nothing special to do; the little flat, as far as it went, was in perfect order. Hero was away. She could not settle to any fresh work at the British Museum; there was, therefore, no spe-

cial occasion for her to go there; besides, in spite of all her resolutions, she dreaded the little lady in gray.

Presently she went out and took a long walk. When she came back Hero had returned. She was bright and lively, but also tired, and said she would be glad to go to bed.

"It is the dogs," she said to Barbara. "The dogs do jump so about me, and of course there is a great deal of physical exercise required in brushing them and taking them out and looking after Mrs. Jennings. Mrs. Jennings is quite a dear old soul; I shall get immensely fond of her presently. Barbara, I am so sleepy; do you greatly mind, dear, if I go to bed?"

Barbara said she did not mind. She went to bed herself, but she could not sleep.

This was only the first day of the week; how would all the others pass? Suspense seemed to weigh upon her. Her head ached as badly as if she were working hard.

At last, one morning, just before the week was up, Hero danced into her friend's room with a letter.

"For you," she said, "and it bears a City address—Parkinson & Co., 110 Cheapside."

Barbara's face turned white; she held out her hand for the letter, tore open the envelope, and read the contents. They were very brief, and were typewritten.

"Dear Madam: If you will have the goodness to call here to-morrow, between eleven and twelve o'clock, I should like to speak to you about your new story, 'A Swift Vengeance.'

"Yours faithfully,

"Arthur Parkinson."

"How white you look, Barbara!" said Hero. "Have you had bad news? Oh, surely, that horrid publisher is not sending the manuscript back!"

"He wants me to call. I don't quite know what it means," said Barbara.

"Oh, if he wants you to call, of course it means success," answered Hero. "Do show me what he has written. Oh, it is in that queer, printed writing. Yes, I see he wants you to go to him immediately; doubtless the story is a great success. Now, Barbara, please sit down and drink off your cup of coffee. I must hurry off without breakfast, for Pet, the Italian greyhound, is not quite well. Babs, I expect to hear great things of you when I return to-night."

Hero left the room; Barbara soon heard her flying nimbly downstairs. She wandered about the little flat, putting things in order, until it was time for her to start for Cheapside. She dressed herself in her best for her short journey. Some one had once told her that it was very important to propitiate publishers by looking as nice as possible.

"If they think you poor, my dear," this wise person had said, "they treat you accordingly; but if they think you are well off, they are under the impression that your writing has succeeded, and, of course, after that they are anxious to give you orders."

Remembering this advice, Barbara now put on her neat black hat and best dress. Then, locking the little hall door of the flat, she slipped the key in her pocket and ran downstairs. She reached Mr. Parkinson's office sharp at eleven o'clock, and ran up the brass-bound stairs, her heart beating tumultuously. The red-haired boy once more opened the door for her.

"You have come back, miss?" he said, surveying her with his critical and not too friendly glance.

"Yes, by appointment," said Barbara somewhat proudly. She felt, whatever happened, she must get the better of that atrocious boy.

"Oh, indeed! Walk in, please, miss," answered the boy.

He flung the door wide open and allowed Barbara to pass.

"Take this chair, please, miss; and now will you have the goodness to fill up this form?"

Barbara wrote her name, somewhat unwillingly, on a printed slip. The boy withdrew with it into the adjacent room. He came back in a moment.

"This way, please, Miss Underhill," he said. His tone was quite suave, and intensely respectful. Barbara augured well by it.

When she entered the room Mr. Parkinson got up, came a step or two forward, and held out his hand to her.

"How do you do?" he said. "Pray take that chair. I troubled you to call because I am interested in what you sent me."

"I am very glad you like it," said Barbara.

"Not so fast, please, Miss Underhill. It is one thing being interested in what one reads, and quite another thing to say that one likes it."

Barbara was silent; her color came and went; she clasped her hands tightly together.

Mr. Parkinson favored her with one of his keen, eagle glances; then, opening a drawer, he took out her manuscript and laid it on a table before him.

"I have read the story," he said. "It is very slight; there is little or no plot."

"Oh, I don't go in for plots," interrupted Barbara

eagerly; "I prefer to devote myself to delineation of character."

"Quite so; and in doing that, you adopt a higher style of writing—not that I by any means despise the story of incident. I should, if I were asked to give my personal advice, beg almost all young writers to study the story of incident. It requires years to pass over one's head, as a rule, before one is able to describe character with any correctness. It is necessary to read life before one can talk of it, is it not?" he added, giving a keen, half-quizzical glance at Barbara's girlish figure as she sat impatiently before him.

"I suppose so, sir," she answered.

"Well, now, to come to the point," said Mr. Parkinson, "I have read your story from beginning to end. I presume you want it to be published?"

"Of course," answered Barbara.

"If you were my daughter I should not allow you to bring anything out for some time. As you are not, however, I am bound to give you advice independently of your age. As a rule, I do not read the manuscripts of unknown writers; I glance at them. A glance is generally sufficient to tell me all their merits or demerits. The beginning of your story is ordinary; it is, in fact, the work of any tolerably well educated and tolerably smart girl. The end, however, Miss Underhill, is remarkable. Where did you get that idea of investing your hero with the strange, miraculous power of touch—the healing by faith? How did it come to you?"

Barbara colored; then her face went white.

"I must not pry into your secrets," said Mr. Parkinson kindly, "but I must say that you have thought out in a very original way a little-worn conception.

The idea is vigorous, and introduced so as to raise the story quite above the mediocre work of the ordinary writer. Now, then, to business. What do you want for this little manuscript?"

"What are you prepared to give?" asked Barbara.

"Well, my first intention was to run it through my new monthly, *The Palm Branch,* but the story, as it is now written, would be spoiled if it were run serially; the weakness of the beginning, too, would be painfully manifest, and I doubt whether people would weary themselves to go on to the end. My present idea is that you should rewrite most of the beginning, and let me have the story back when you have worked in your last idea, to a certain extent, into the first pages of your manuscript. Your hero can drop that rather silly lovemaking, and become impressed with the idea that he has got a special gift from Heaven, in the earlier part of the work—that will lead up to the final really remarkable end. With regard to terms, I cannot offer much for a first book, but I would give you twenty-five pounds for the copyright, if you care to accept so small a sum."

"Twenty-five pounds!" said Barbara eagerly. "Oh, I think that a great deal of money. I am greatly obliged to you, sir."

"You are a mere child to be an author," said Mr. Parkinson kindly, "but if you go on as well as you have begun, the world will hear of you yet. Now, pray take your manuscript home and look it over, with a view to carrying out the thought which I have just suggested."

"I am sure I can manage what you wish," said Barbara.

"Well, I'll give you the manuscript."

Mr. Parkinson rang a bell as he spoke. The red-haired boy quickly appeared.

"Put this into a parcel at once, Jefferson," said his chief.

The boy gave Barbara a knowing grin, took up her story with a certain gingerliness of touch, and left the room.

"Pray make your corrections as quickly as possible," continued Mr. Parkinson, "for I want the story to run through the press during the next few weeks. How soon can you make your corrections?"

"In a couple of days," said Barbara. "I'll work at them day and night," she answered.

"Well, that is your own affair, only don't overdo it, for your health's sake. This is Tuesday. Can you let me have it back, say, on Monday?"

"Yes, sir; I am sure I can."

"We will consider it settled, then. You will receive proofs almost immediately. I will pay you on the day of publication; and if the story proves successful, you may look for fresh orders."

Mr. Parkinson stood up as he spoke and held out his hand.

"Sir, you are more than kind," said Barbara.

She found a strange difficulty in speaking. The rejoicing which she thought would have filled her heart was conspicuous by its absence. Nevertheless, of course, she was glad—she was really glad. Of course, this was a moment of unprecedented triumph. She had written her first book. Her first book was accepted by one of the leading publishers in London. The little thought which she had daringly made her own had enabled her to conquer. Oh, yes, it was her thought; the little woman in gray would never miss it.

She left the editor's office, to be confronted by the red-haired boy.

"Here's your manuscript, miss, and my regrets with it. I am truly sorry for you, miss."

"For what, may I ask?" inquired Barbara.

"Well, miss, it don't go far to say, but the comfort for you is to know that there are lots of others in the same box. You'll feel it for a bit, then you'll get over it. Why, I have a sister—she ain't as old as you—and she thought, bless her! that she could write. I said——"

"Jefferson, come here!" called out Mr. Parkinson's voice from the next room.

"Before you go, allow me to say one thing," said Barbara; "you are absolutely mistaken." She felt, come what would, that she must not be humiliated in the eyes of that horrid office boy. "This story is going to be printed. I am taking it back to make certain corrections. You will be sending me proofs by and by."

"Proofs, miss!" said Jefferson, raising his eyebrows. "I beg your pardon a hundred thousand times. I am sure you must be wonderfully clever, and you look it, if you'll allow me to say so, miss, about the eyes. I'll encourage Lizzie when I go home to-night, and tell her youth's no obstacle when there's downright virgin talent."

The boy opened the door for Barbara with a low, sweeping bow, which had, even yet, a tinge of mockery in it, and she found herself descending the stairs.

CHAPTER XXI

LIKE FATHER—LIKE DAUGHTER

MEANWHILE, matters were progressing in a thoroughly satisfactory way at the farm. Rosamond was getting a grip of the business. She was by nature a very careful, matter-of-fact sort of girl. She had no high-flown ideas with regard to duty. To Rosamond, the duty that lay nearest was always first; consequently she had a good deal of courage, and was not afraid to make certain ventures. Ignorant as she had been at the beginning of her little undertaking with regard to the mere rudiments of farming, she was not four months at The Gables before she was quite a practical farmer in a small way. The two cows turned out a success. The fowls were laying eggs, and the young pullets were fattening rapidly for the market. The vegetable garden also was a source of profit. There were several fruit trees which were well laden with apples, pears and plums, and other autumn fruits. These Rosamond had all carefully picked. The plums were made into jam; the apples stored away in an old barn, swept dry and clean for the purpose; the pears were sold at Charlton, along with the fresh butter and the nice, new-laid eggs. Not having to pay any rent for the farm was, of course, a great pull, and, in short, the clever young girl-farmer was beginning to make the

thing pay. Farmers on a large scale near watched her experiment with much interest. It was impossible for these good-natured men and women to be jealous of a mere girl, and when they saw that Rosamond looked as humble as possible, notwithstanding her little successes, and the demand which was created for the carefully buttered fresh eggs, and the nice butter in its tempting pats, they came forward and voluntarily offered her valuable advice. This she was only too pleased to accept, and the good-will toward her was all the more increased in consequence. In short, there was no thorn in Rosamond's happy lot except one, but that was a very bitter one. Barbara had left her; she did not even know where Barbara was.

"I shall not give you my address, dear Rose," Barbara had said in the letter which Rosamond had found on the morning after her sister had left. "I want to make my own experiment without your knowing anything about me for three full months. At the end of that time, if I succeed, I will write and tell you everything. If I fail, I shall be obliged to come back to you. I shall take great, great care of myself, so don't be a bit anxious about me. I am taking fifty pounds of my capital, and I promise, if possible, not to draw any more. Please, dear Rosamond, don't even try to find out where I am living."

In the course of that first dreadful morning Mrs. Gunning came over to The Gables in an overwhelming state of excitement. Hero had also gone away. It was easy for Rosamond to guess why Barbara was so anxious that the secret of her present residence should be respected.

"It is a very daring and dreadful thing for her to

do," thought Rosamond, "but I always knew she was strong and self-willed. How I used to lean on her! Oh! surely she will keep herself straight? Surely, she will do nothing really wrong? Yes, I will respect her secret. Of course, it would be possible for me to find out where she is, but I will not try to do so."

Rosamond said as much to the angry Mrs. Gunning.

"Yes, Barbara has left me," she said. "I have no reason whatever to suppose that Hero has gone with her; Barbara has not confided her plans to me. It may be possible that Hero has gone with her; I cannot say, for I do not know."

"And you seriously mean to tell me," said Mrs. Gunning, "that you will allow that harum-scarum young sister of yours to plunge into the wickedness of London life without trying to recover her? Can I believe the evidence of my own ears? I surely must be mistaken."

"I did not say I would allow Barbara to plunge into London life. I said nothing," said Rosamond with some dignity. "I only wish you to understand that though I am deeply hurt at what Barbara has done, I trust her."

"Well, then, I don't trust Hero. To tell you the truth, Miss Underhill, I am a very unhappy woman. I am absolutely afraid to tell Mrs. Chevening that her granddaughter has fled."

"Suppose I go and tell her?" said Rosamond after a pause.

Mrs. Gunning began to clasp and unclasp her wiry hands.

"I shall lose my situation," she said. "I was only kept at The Hall to look after Hero and educate her.

The old lady will be frightfully angry. Oh, what mischief that naughty, wicked girl—yes, I will add girls, for your sister is the most to blame—what mischief those dreadful girls have done!"

"I did not suppose that their going away would injure you," said Rosamond. "Yes, Mrs. Gunning, I will certainly go and see Mrs. Chevening; I will explain to her that I do not know where Hero is, but that, of course, my suspicions point to the fact of her having left home with Barbara. If Mrs. Chevening wishes to take steps to recover Hero, I, of course, cannot prevent her."

"Really, Miss Underhill, I am obliged to you," said Mrs. Gunning, "and I think, after all, it is the wisest thing to do. You will, of course, give Mrs. Chevening clearly to understand that I have had nothing to do with Hero's escape."

"I certainly will. You did your best for Hero according to your light; but I am sorry."

"Sorry for what, young lady?"

"That you did not try, even once or twice, to put yourself in her place; she is so young, so fresh, so pretty, it would, surely, have been easy to make her happy and contented."

Mrs. Gunning rose from her seat.

"Perhaps you are right," she said. "I feel queer and confused this morning. The fact is, I am an elderly woman, and out of touch with the world. I know things are hard for that child, but those who do not understand the reason for her grandmother's strange conduct ought not to speak."

"Whatever that reason may be," answered Rosamond, "Hero's life ought not to be ruined. Shall I come with you now to The Hall?" she added.

"Perhaps it would be as well. Put on your hat, and we can start at once."

Rosamond hurried up to her own room.

Half an hour later she found herself once more inside the formidable oak doors of The Hall, and rapidly following Mrs. Gunning down a long passage. The elder lady knocked at a door which had a thick curtain in front of it. A cracked, high voice said "Come in!"

"Go in by yourself; I cannot possibly face her," said Mrs. Gunning.

She turned aside, leaving poor Rosamond alone. There was a momentary quickening of her heart-beats, and then the young girl found herself standing in Mrs. Chevening's presence.

The old lady had been reading the morning paper. Notwithstanding her eighty-six years, she still possessed wonderful eyesight. When she saw Rosamond she put down her paper and stared with all her might.

"Upon my word, Rosamond Underhill once again!" she exclaimed. "What does this mean? Come a little closer, my dear. Who admitted you into my presence?"

"Mrs. Gunning," answered Rosamond.

"Mrs. Gunning!" repeated Mrs. Chevening in a voice which boded ill for that hapless individual. "Gunning has indeed forgotten herself. Frances! Are you there?"

An elderly woman immediately entered from a side room.

"Frances, go and ask Mrs. Gunning to come to me directly."

The maid softly withdrew. While she was absent Mrs. Chevening resumed the reading of her paper; Rosamond stood uncomfortably somewhere about the

center of the room. At the end of five or six minutes the servant came back alone.

"Mrs. Gunning sends her most respectful compliments, madam, but she is sorry she cannot come, as she has a terrible headache this morning."

"Put 'coward' for 'headache,' and we will get nearer the truth," said Mrs. Chevening in a sharp voice. "Gunning has done something wrong, and is afraid —I know her little ways. You can go, Frances, and be sure you shut the door after you."

Staring in great wonder at Rosamond, the elderly servant did as she was told.

The moment she found herself alone, Rosamond took her courage in both hands and went straight up to Mrs. Chevening.

"You are quite right," she said. "Mrs. Gunning is afraid. She has got terrible news to give you; she is so frightened that she cannot break it to you."

"What is the news? Pray speak. Remember I am not as young as I was," said Mrs. Chevening, turning white to her very lips.

"I am sorry for you," said Rosamond, "but as it happens, I am not at all afraid of you, so I volunteered to break the news to you."

"Speak, girl! speak! Don't keep eighty-six waiting. When you come to my years you will know how bad it is for the weakened heart of the aged to be kept in suspense."

"I will tell you everything if you will listen to me," said Rosamond. "Last night, quite unknown to myself or my sisters, Barbara left us."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Chevening in a somewhat mincing voice, the color returning to her lips. "Barbara? I did not even know you had a friend or a sister of the name of Barbara. Did poor Gunning

think this would affect me so badly? Of course, if Barbara, whoever she is, has done anything wrong, I am sorry for you. Girls certainly are not what they were in my days. The love of plain needlework has completely vanished. They think of nothing but amusing themselves and aping men—poor, miserable-looking men they make, too. I don't suppose there is a real, downright, good, old-fashioned girl now existing on the earth."

"Please let me finish my story, Mrs. Chevening. Barbara left us last night, and Hero——"

"Hero!" said Mrs. Chevening with a start.

"We think Hero must have gone away with her. Anyhow, she also has disappeared. A rope-ladder was found hanging to the attic above her bedroom; she left a letter behind her, which Mrs. Gunning was afraid to give to you—I have brought it. Here it is. I don't know where Barbara has gone; therefore, I don't know where Hero has gone. I can only suspect that they are away together. That is my news."

Mrs. Chevening sat strangely silent; she did not tremble any more, nor did the color leave her face. On the contrary, a bright spot came into each sunken cheek, and her eyes—blue eyes they must have been in her youth—bright and lovely as Hero's own, began to glitter with a very unpleasant light. Rosamond watched her anxiously.

"Can she have heard what I said?" thought the young girl to herself. "Why does she not speak?"

After a prolonged pause Mrs. Chevening did find her voice.

"Like father, like daughter," she said. "You mentioned that you had the note which Hero left, with you."

Rosamond put it into the old lady's hands.

Without even looking at it she tore it into five or six pieces.

"Miss Underhill," she said, "there is a small fire in the grate; please put this litter into it."

"But what a pity that you have not read what Hero has written!" said Rosamond.

"I presume that at eighty-six years of age I may be allowed to do as I think fit," said Mrs. Chevening, resuming her icy and most formidable tone. "When you have burned the note you can leave me, Miss Underhill."

"Have you nothing to say about Hero?"

"Nothing whatever, except to repeat once more, like father, like daughter. Less than a week ago, in this room, Hero faithfully promised me that she would have nothing whatever to do with you or with your sisters; I respected her word, I believed her, for her ancestors were men of honor. I forgot, however, that she herself comes of a different stock. Alas! Miss Underhill, I have nothing further to say to you."

"Then you will not try to find Hero?"

"Certainly not. In the future she has nothing whatever to do with me. Pray tell Gunning that I hold her blameless. The person I do blame is your sister, the Barbara of whom you have just spoken. I never want to hear your sister's name again, I never wish to hear my granddaughter's name again, and I never wish to see you again. Pray leave me immediately."

Rosamond was forced to quit the room.

Mrs. Gunning was waiting, trembling, outside.

"I have told her everything," said Rosamond. "She is very angry, but she does not blame you; she says

she will never speak to Hero again. She made use of one queer expression, 'Like father, like daughter.' "

"I know what she means, and it is a cruel blow," said Mrs. Gunning. "Well, Miss Underhill, I am obliged to you. You think I may really go to her presently?"

"I think you may. I doubt if she will allude to Hero in your presence."

"Unhappy girl!—child indeed! Well, as she has made her bed, so she must lie on it. Good-by, Miss Underhill."

Rosamond returned to the farm. She busied herself more than ever in bringing her experiment to success. She was occupied from morning to night. Nevertheless, night after night, as she laid her head on her pillow, and morning after morning, as she awoke with the dawn, the thought of Barbara pressed sore against her heart.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BLACK SILK, THE GRAY SILK, AND THE DRAWING-ROOM IN EATON SQUARE

Nature had seldom created a brighter or sweeter girl than Hero Chevening. She was witty without being in the least vulgar; she was full of rare sympathy; she was very beautiful to look at; she also possessed infinite and really wonderful tact. It was Hero's nature to make the best of things. It is true that her life at The Hall had been almost unbearable, but now that she felt a certain degree of freedom she was perfectly happy, and Mrs. Jennings had never obtained so contented a companion. In short, Hero was not long in her presence before she completely fascinated that rather cantankerous and troublesome little woman. Even Dawson could not help smiling when Hero's bright face appeared, morning after morning, at the door.

"Run up, miss," she used to say; "missus is fairly craving for you. I am sure it's a load off my mind that she has got a companion to suit her at last."

Then when Hero reached Mrs. Jennings' room, Mrs. Jennings would greet her with an affectionate smile, and six pampered, overpetted, but really affectionate, quadrupeds, would rush in a body to meet her, jumping all over her, licking her face and hands, and giving her that worship which the canine species bestows so largely upon the human.

"If I did not like Mrs. Jennings, I should love these dear dogs," thought Hero to herself. She soon began to discriminate between them, to find out their idiosyncrasies, to humor them, and to draw out their best points. She also fairly put old Mrs. Jennings into screams of laughter by teaching Demon, Pet and Duke some new tricks.

Duke would lie, at the word of command, as if he were stone dead, and Demon and Pet would sit, one at his head and the other at his feet, looking at him in the most miserable and conscious manner. Then, when the right moment came, the resuscitated Duke would jump up to take the lump of sugar which he had so well earned.

Hero looked like the veritable child she was at these times, and Mrs. Jennings felt as if youth were returning to her as she watched her. In some ways, Mrs. Jennings reminded Hero of her grandmother. She was about the same age and about the same height, but her brown eyes had a far kindlier gleam in them than the stony, pale-blue eyes of the old autocrat at The Hall.

Hero used to watch her intently at these times, and sometimes the faintest ghost of a sigh would escape her lips.

"What is it, my love? A child of your age ought never to sigh; it weakens the heart," said the little lady.

"I suppose, however young one is, there are times when one has to feel sad," Hero would answer brightly; "but I am all right now, Mrs. Jennings. Come here, Demon, and sit on my lap."

"Really, Hero, I shall be jealous of you if the dogs get any fonder. I insist, at least, on Pet occupying my lap whilst you have Demon on yours."

"Pet, go this minute to Mrs. Jennings," said Hero in an authoritative voice.

Pet, who much preferred Hero, went to the old lady in a somewhat gingerly manner, with his tail drooping. As her pockets were full of chocolates, however, he stayed quietly on her lap and allowed himself to be overfed with sweets.

"You are completely spoiling him," said Hero. "I forbid you to give him another chocolate. If you want to know why I sighed just now, I sighed because you reminded me of some one I used to know very well."

"Some one you used to know very well? I wonder who that was."

"A dear old lady, something like you, only prettier."

"Really, Hero Chevening, you are a very audacious young person. Do you mean to imply that I am not a pretty old lady?"

"You would be a sweet-looking old lady if you would allow me to dress you."

"What do you mean, child?"

"Well, you wear such ugly clothes. If I might put you into——"

"What? Do let me hear," said Mrs. Jennings. "Really, this is most entertaining. My last companion never would talk; she read aloud the whole time, and the dogs detested her. What would you dress me in, my love?"

"In very handsome dark gray or black silk, and you should wear real lace ruffles, and a soft lace cap over that beautiful white hair. You would look quite a picture."

"Hero, you must be joking. A woman at my time of life look like a picture!"

"You don't look at all nice as it is," said Hero, bending her head a little to one side, and speaking critically. "Your hair, of course, is lovely; nothing can spoil that. And you have that dear, dark kind of face which suits white hair so well. But why will you wear snuff color and that horrid cap? Oh, do let us go out with the dogs! We might go to one of the shops in Buckingham Palace Road, and I would choose a heavenly costume for you. Will you let me, Mrs. Jennings? Please—please say 'Yes.'"

"You certainly are a fascinating little witch," said Mrs. Jennings. "The idea of my looking well! My child, I will tell you something. I was really handsome—I was much admired in my youth, and even in my middle age; but, of course, lately I have given up all those sort of vanities. The fact is, dear, I am expecting a visitor before long."

"A visitor? Really?"

"Yes; some one whom I dearly love, and who—who once gave me trouble—bitter trouble. I should like to look nice when he comes back."

"Mrs. Jennings, you must look nice!"

"But Dawson, my dear—what will she say?"

"Now, are you going to be ruled by Dawson?" asked Hero. "Dawson is an excellent creature, and I am very fond of her; but I know, if I were going to be under the dominion of any one in this house, I should choose Duke. Duke, come here. Now, Duke, the solemn truth. Do you wish Mrs. Jennings to be turned into a dear picture-lady worthy of a beautiful dog like yourself; or is she to remain the old dowd she was when I took possession of her? Yes, Duke, when I took possession of her. Now, Mrs. Jennings, please don't laugh. If Duke wishes you to remain a dowd he will not eat this piece of

sugar which I am going to place in the hollow of his nose. If you are to be turned into a charming old lady, he will catch the sugar at the word of command and gobble it up. Now, then, Duke, good dog—trust!"

Duke stood up on his hind legs and looked unutterable things. Mrs. Jennings fairly shook in her chair with mirth.

Hero placed the sugar on the dog's nose, gazed at him earnestly for a moment, then said, "Paid for." The sugar was caught, crunched up, and Hero clapped her hands.

"There," she said, "you know what Duke's opinion is."

Duke's eyes looked quite melting as he licked his chops after devouring the sugar.

"Well, I declare," said Mrs. Jennings, "you are an extraordinary child! And I suppose Duke's opinion does settle it. Of course, I never thought the dogs would care how I looked; but they have taken such a fancy to you that I suppose they are really rather susceptible to appearances. That quite settles the question. We will have a carriage after lunch, my love, and drive to Westbourne Grove. I rather fancy things are cheaper there than in Buckingham Palace Road. I must really economize a little, you know. I don't quite agree with your idea of gray silk. I think black would be best for me. Or might it not be black alpaca?"

"On no account," said Hero. "Alpaca would be downright vulgar at your age. It must be silk—good, stiff, proper silk, fit for a dear old lady. Now, then, I shall go off to Dawson and desire her to send a messenger to the livery stables."

Hero skipped joyfully out of the room. She gave

her orders in such a commanding and yet coaxing tone that Dawson had not the heart to refuse.

"But did you say an open carriage, Miss Chevening?"

"Yes, please; a comfortable one. It had better be a landau."

"Are you sure that it is safe for Mrs. Jennings at her extreme old age?"

"Oh, yes, Dawson; it is perfectly safe. Mrs. Jennings is quite strong, and what she really wants is air and amusement. Do you not think I am making her young?"

"I declare, miss, it is cheerful to have you in the house," said Dawson. "Well, I'll go and send Tom off at once with the order."

Accordingly, immediately after lunch that day Mrs. Jennings, Hero, and the six dogs took an airing abroad. Duke, the collie, and Bounce, the Scotch terrier, followed the carriage, but Chip, Jakes, Pet and Demon were accommodated with seats within. Chip and Jakes sat perfectly upright, facing Mrs. Jennings and Hero, but Pet had a place of honor on the old lady's lap, and Demon took possession of Hero's.

"Now we really feel nice," said Hero. "Where are we to go for the dresses, Mrs. Jennings?"

"To Westbourne Grove, dear. I rather dread Buckingham Palace Road."

"Well, for my part, I don't care where we go," said Hero; "but please understand that we are not going to get cheap things. It is all very well for young girls like me to wear cheap dresses, but you at least must be dressed according to your age and station. You must live up to your years, Mrs. Jennings."

"Live up to my years! My good child, what in the world do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. The longer you live the more you ought to respect yourself. You are over eighty, therefore you ought to respect yourself immensely. You will be a very proud old lady before I have done with you. Now, then, shall I give the coachman the order? It rather upsets Pet when you fidget about."

"Yes, child; pray undertake the whole thing; you have quite made my heart beat, and yet you have given me a great deal of pleasurable excitement. It is long since I was so entertained. You might be a granddaughter of my own, you are so very nice to me, Hero."

"Well, you see, I am fond of you," said Hero in her sweet voice. She just turned her dark-blue eyes for a moment to send a ray of pure, unadulterated love into the wrinkled old eyes of the woman by her side.

The order was given that the carriage was to drive to a well-known shop in Westbourne Grove, and here the two ladies got out, accompanied, as usual, by the six dogs. Hero, by this time, was clever enough to manage the leashes, but they made a somewhat remarkable progress into the big shop. Several customers turned to look: such a very old lady, such a very young girl, such a number of dogs!

Presently one of the shopwalkers came up, and Hero gave her orders in a decided tone.

"We want to see really good silk," she said, "suitable for this lady." She gave a little bow as she spoke, in the direction of Mrs. Jennings. Any one would suppose from her air that she was alluding at least to Queen Victoria.

The shopwalker bowed also, not knowing what exalted personage might be concealed under humble-looking little Mrs. Jennings. He led the ladies to a counter, accommodated them with chairs, which the dogs instantly monopolized, and had to be knocked off. Finally a shopman came forward, and Hero again took possession of the occasion.

"We want to see the very best silks you keep," she said, "the richest quality; dark gray and black."

"My dear child," said Mrs. Jennings, "I do not want two silk dresses."

"Yes, dear, you do," replied Hero in her coaxing voice. "While you are about it, you may just as well have both. It is really a great trouble going shopping with the dogs, and we shall not want to repeat the experiment often."

Mrs. Jennings sighed and shook her head.

"What will Dawson say to all this?" she exclaimed.

But Hero was absolutely indifferent to anything Dawson might like to say.

A length of black silk was cut off, and a similar length of dark gray. Then the ladies were conveyed to a lace counter, where Hero indulged in unheard-of extravagance in the purchasing of real lace.

Mrs. Jennings was simply horrified.

"Hero," she whispered in despair, "I shall be ruined! I shall not be able to pay for it!"

"Oh, yes, you will; you have plenty of money in the bank," answered Hero in her very calmest of voices.

The lace and silk being purchased, the ladies returned once more to their carriage, and had a delightful drive through the Park.

As they were driving near the Row, Hero suddenly spoke.

"What day do you expect your friend?" she asked.

"My friend, Hero? Ah, soon, very soon; in about three weeks, I think."

"Then your dresses must be ready, and there are a great many other things to do. We had better go to a dressmaker at once."

"I think Dawson knows something of dressmaking," said Mrs. Jennings.

"Dawson!" answered Hero in a withering tone. "Do you suppose for an instant, Mrs. Jennings, that Dawson could make these dresses? Your dresses must be made in a very beautiful way."

"My dear child, once for all, I will not appear in the fashion of the present day."

"You need not, dear; the present fashion would not suit you. Your dresses must be made in the most charming style to suit a very pretty old lady. Ruffles of lace must half hide your hands, and ruffles of lace must surround your neck, and your cap must be soft, very soft, and falling in graceful folds over your dear white hair. I think I shall do the ruffling myself; I believe I have a turn for that sort of thing."

Mrs. Jennings became more and more interested.

"Any one would suppose," she said after a pause, "that I was a young girl going to her first drawing-room. I absolutely feel excited. After all, snuff color is not becoming, though it wears well, my love—it wears admirably."

"It is just the color of dirt, and therefore does not show dirt," answered Hero; "but once you get into your nice new dresses you are never to put on that snuff-colored dress again, do you hear?"

The ladies returned home, and early the next morning Hero had the satisfaction of giving full direc-

tions to a competent dressmaker with regard to Mrs. Jennings' toilet. Having arranged matters so far to her satisfaction, she then began to turn her active little brain to revolutionizing the house.

One morning she arrived fully twenty minutes before nine o'clock.

"Mrs. Jennings is not up yet, miss," said Dawson. "But I will whisper a secret to you," she continued; "the dresses came back last night."

"Did she open the box, Dawson?" asked Hero.

"No, miss. She said when you were not in the house she did not seem to take much interest in dress."

"Oh, well, now I am in the house she shall try them on; but please listen to me, Dawson, the room she sits in is not at all pretty."

"Well, no, miss, but it seems to suit an aged body like my mistress. Is it not wrong of you to put vanity into her head, Miss Hero?"

"I don't put vanity into her head; I just make her life interesting," answered Hero. "Why should she not enjoy herself when she has plenty of money in the bank? She does not mind what she spends on the dogs, although that is silly, for the dogs get so pampered. But as to her own appearance, until I came she never gave it a thought. Now, Dawson, I arrived early this morning on purpose."

"What for, miss? You really are a most determined young lady; but I will say I never saw my mistress take so to any one, never since the poor gentleman she was so fond of went away."

"Is that the gentleman who is coming within the next few weeks?" asked Hero.

"The very same, miss; but you must not say that I mentioned it."

"I never repeat what people tell me," answered Hero with a little, haughty air which suited her well and repressed Dawson.

"She comes of a good old stock herself," muttered the servant, "although she is obliged to go out as a companion. I wonder now, pretty lamb, what her history is.

"Well, miss," she continued, "you cannot see my mistress for a bit. She never cares to be disturbed before nine o'clock."

"No, Dawson, but you and I will go around the house. I have never seen the house properly yet. It is a very large and beautiful house, is it not?"

"Well—yes, miss. At one time it was considered a mansion. They had plenty of company here in old Mr. Jennings' time, but since he died my mistress has never cared to see company, and the house has got shut up, and shut up, and shut up, until now there is only a little bit of it used."

"Well, it has got to open, and open, and open," said Hero. "I have taken the reins, and I mean to manage."

"Dear me, miss, you are masterful!"

"Come along, Dawson; you know you are delighted in your heart of hearts. Now I want to see the drawing-room."

"The drawing-room, miss? It has not been sat in for over fifteen years."

"All the more reason why it should be used now. Do you suppose I am going to dress up my dear old lady in the lovely way I have managed to, and then that I am going to keep her in that hideous little back sitting-room? No; she shall use the drawing-room. Come, Dawson, I want to look at it."

Accordingly, Dawson, puzzled and pleased, led the

way, and Hero examined the drawing-room to her heart's content. It was a very large room, and had the cold, damp, disagreeable feeling which shut-up rooms always possess. The furniture was, in some ways, however, magnificent. There were all sorts of Queen Anne tables and Chippendale furniture and other splendid relics of a past age. It is true that the Brussels carpet was a little worn, and the original pattern somewhat difficult to distinguish. The paper on the walls was much faded, and there were stains, dark stains, caused by damp, here and there. The lovely tapestry curtains were also not of the latest design, but Hero, who had a keen eye for decoration, saw at a glance that these things could quickly be renovated.

"Don't you think your mistress very much better, Dawson?" she said abruptly.

"To be sure I do, miss. Why, I would hardly know her; she is as active as possible, and so much interested in different things, and she don't talk from morn to night of the quadrupeds. Really, miss, I have a love myself for dumb animals, but never to hear anything else spoken of, it do become monotonous now and then, Miss Hero."

"To be sure it does, Dawson. Well, now, you see your mistress has her dress—and a very pretty dress it is—and as she does not stir about much it will last her a very long time, so you and I have got to give her a new interest. The new interest, Dawson, is going to be the drawing-room. She shall come down here with me this morning—but please, beforehand, will you open the windows, and draw up the blinds, and light a large fire in the grate?"

"Well, you have courage," said Dawson, "but it shall be done. You amuse me, too, miss; I have

something else to think of now besides the quadrupeds."

An old-fashioned grandfather's clock on one of the landings struck nine at this moment, and Hero hurried upstairs to attend to the dogs. Mrs. Jennings was already seated in her chair by the fire.

"My dear child," she said in an excited voice, "the box with the dresses has come."

Hero looked rather melancholy.

"They are so unsuited to this room," she said with a sigh.

"Hero, what do you mean? Why, you ordered them. I am quite anxious, really anxious, to try them on."

"So you shall," said Hero; "but first of all I do want you to have a suitable room to wear them in. Now this is a lovely house, full of beautiful rooms. I have just been in the drawing-room. In the future, Mrs. Jennings, you and I will sit in the drawing-room."

"No, Hero! no! I could not bear it!"

"But you won't look like a picture—you will look quite out of place in this room. In this room you really are suitably dressed in your snuff color, but if you wish to wear black silk fit for a duchess, and gray silk fit for the Queen herself, you must use a room to correspond. Now I have just been in the drawing-room, and I want you to come there, and the dogs shall come, too. Duke, would not you like to sit in the drawing-room? If you would, sit up this minute and beg."

Duke rose immediately on his hind legs, having a keen eye for sugar, large lumps of which Hero was in the habit of keeping in her pocket.

Soon afterward the old lady and the young one

went downstairs to the magnificent reception-room. As usual, Hero turned Mrs. Jennings around her little finger, and before the end of that day upholsterers were sent in to put up new curtains to the large doors, and to slightly alter the tapestry curtains which hung around the wide expanse of windows.

Hero also rushed off to Liberty's to buy little table covers, antimacassars, and a few other pretty articles, to give the room a fresh appearance. Then, with Dawson's connivance, she sent a large order to a neighboring florist, and flowers in pots were introduced here and there; large ferns, and even a palm or two, were also admitted into the room.

On the following day the drawing-room looked as if it had been lived in for years. Mrs. Jennings' own favorite arm-chair was brought down from the parlor at the top of the house. The dogs were accommodated with rugs, and Hero had the intense satisfaction of leading in her little, old lady dressed in her black silk, with her ruffles of real lace, and beautiful cap.

"You are a queen," said Hero. "Now sit down and look around you. Don't you feel fifty times happier?"

"I certainly feel happy because you take an interest in me," said Mrs. Jennings. "Yes, and the room is certainly beautiful. It seems to bring back my youth to sit here. Do you know, Hero, that I have lived in this house as wife, as widow, for over sixty years?"

"Well, it is a very nice house to live in," said Hero.

"You have made it nice to me once again, darling. Yes, I feel quite happy; I shall be ready to see my friend when he returns. But, Hero, dear, as you

have done so much for me, you must allow me to do some little thing in return for you. That brown holland dress, for instance——"

"Oh, please don't talk of my clothes, I—I am nothing at all, I am not to be considered," said Hero, but her cheeks grew crimson.

"Well, Hero, that is not my way of looking at the question. I think you are to be considered a great deal. Please run upstairs to my bedroom; when you open the door you will find a box; untie the cord, take off the brown paper, and look at what lies inside. I want my little girl to be also suitably dressed when she sits with me in this beautiful drawing-room."

"You don't mean to say you have got me a lovely frock?" said Hero. "Well, I must honestly say that I pine for nice clothes. I never did when I was in the country, but since I have come to London, and seen people in smart dresses in the Park, I have wished sometimes to be like them. But I hope, Mrs. Jennings, the dress you have bought me is a kind that the dogs won't injure."

"The dogs must learn to behave themselves," said Mrs. Jennings in quite a tone of asperity, which so surprised and delighted Hero that she clapped her hands with joy.

"I do declare you are cured!" she exclaimed. "Your love for dogs had almost assumed the strength of a mania when I came here; now you treat them like reasonable creatures. Pet, go this minute and lie on your velvet rug. Demon, if you don't stay by the fire and stop quarreling with Bounce, I shall send you back to the room upstairs; do you hear me, sir?"

Demon blinked his bright eyes, shook his crooked

little legs, and finally subsided in a meek manner by Bounce's side.

Duke, who took a lordly air, as befitted his title, from the first, lay down somewhere in the center of the room, and Hero ran upstairs to try on her pretty frock.

CHAPTER XXIII

TO MEET MISS CLARKSON

It was surprising in what an incredibly short space of time Hero Chevening managed to revolutionize the old house in Eaton Square. One by one the splendid old rooms were opened, cleaned out, and got ready for occupation. Then a proper staff of servants was engaged, and in short, the house began to look exactly like the neighboring houses close by. Hero managed everything without appearing to manage at all. She simply suggested in that quiet manner which was peculiar to her, and Mrs. Jennings found herself following in the energetic young lead not at all against her will.

Dawson was promoted to be housekeeper and lady's maid. The dining-room was used for meals, the library was opened, aired, partly refurnished, and stocked with fresh books, which Hero ordered somewhat indiscriminately.

Mrs. Jennings, dressed in her rich black silk, or her lovely dark gray, as the occasion required, sat day after day in her beautiful drawing-room, and now Hero began to turn her active little brain to the use that the renovated house should be put to.

"It is a perfect sin to waste it on an old woman and a very young girl," she said to herself. "People ought to come here, people ought to see us. Where

could any one find in the whole of England a more fascinating old lady than my darling Mrs. Jennings? Who would recognize her for the hideous little woman she appeared the first day I saw her? Yes, we must entertain company. Mrs. Jennings must look up her friends. What a great deal of good it did her when she was having her dresses made—the fitting them on, the talking them over, and finally the wearing of them, quite took her out of herself; then there was the rearranging and opening out of the old house; but now the dresses are made, and the house is opened, and Mrs. Jennings must have some fresh interest, or she will fall back once more upon the dogs. Now, no one loves dogs better than I do, but dogs are dogs, and human beings are human beings, and I must say candidly, I put the human race before the canine. Yes, it is absolutely necessary for Mrs. Jennings to entertain."

Accordingly, one day toward the end of September, Hero seated herself, as usual, by her friend's side. She was busily engaged in making some soft ruffles for the little lady's wrists.

"A penny for your thoughts, Hero," said Mrs. Jennings, who, having just partaken of a very delicious, well-cooked lunch in a handsome room, and afterward having enjoyed a nice little nap, was in exactly the humor to wish to be pleasantly entertained.

"Hero, a penny for your thoughts," she repeated.

"They are worth a great deal more than a penny," said Hero brightly, "but you shall have them without purchase. Now, do you know what I have been thinking about?"

"I have no doubt something fantastic and out of the common, as usual," said Mrs. Jennings with a much interested smile.

"Not at all. I want you to rack your memory."

"My memory, dear child—my memory! Oh, by the way, Hero, do you think that Duke is quite well? I noticed when I touched him a minute ago that his nose was hot."

"Duke is in perfect health," said Hero. "Lie down, Duke, and keep quiet. Now, then, Mrs. Jennings, dear, please think hard. When did you last have company in this house?"

"Oh, darling, I have been a solitary woman for many years."

"Well, now you shall know my thoughts. It seems such a pity that you and I should live day after day in this beautiful house, and that no one should ever come to see us. You know the nice parlor maid we have engaged, she is quite accustomed to waiting, and the cook makes the most delicious cakes I ever tasted —then the housemaid, she keeps the stairs and the reception-rooms in perfect order. When that friend of yours comes back, do you think he will like to be alone with you?"

"Very likely, Hero, very likely indeed; he has been accustomed to solitude."

Mrs. Jennings' lips trembled as she spoke, and a misty look came into her dark eyes.

"Well, then, all I can say is this," said Hero, stamping her little foot with impatience, "that solitude is very bad for him, and for everybody else. When he comes here he must see some of your friends, or you will not be doing him justice. What friends have you, Mrs. Jennings?"

"There was Miss Clarkson," said Mrs. Jennings; "I used to know Miss Clarkson very well—that is, before she got so celebrated. She is a well-known author now, and I have not seen her for quite—let

me see—quite six years. I used to be fond of her, she gave me sympathy, she knew that I had gone through much sorrow. I should rather like to see Miss Clarkson again."

"Wait a minute," said Hero, "until I get my little pocketbook out."

She thrust her hand into her pocket, drew out a small notebook, and wrote down Miss Clarkson's name.

"Where does she live?" she asked.

"Why, in Eaton Square, my love, not six doors from here."

"Delightful! We'll soon have her back."

"But, dear, will she care to come? She is a celebrated author."

"You don't mean to say that she has written books?" said Hero, her eyes dancing.

"Yes; some novels, and some books of poetry—they have all made hits, I am given to understand. I never cared for poetry myself, and of late years I have only taken an interest in what I call dog literature; but her novels, they say, are also very clever. She has made a great deal of money by her books—not that she wants the money, for she is quite independent of it, having private means. She spends a great deal of her time at the British Museum."

"We will have her to tea, by all means," said Hero. "Now is there anybody else?"

"I used to know Mr. and Mrs. Charles."

"Mr. and Mrs. Charles? I am glad there is a Mr. I don't believe it is good for women to associate only with their own sex. And where do they live, please?"

"In Belgrave Square."

"We often drive through Belgrave Square, do we not?" asked Hero.

"Of course, my love; it is one of the most fashionable parts of London."

"I will enter their names in my notebook," said Hero. "Anybody else?"

"Yes, there are others, but I don't think I want to see all my old friends together. I should not object to Miss Clarkson, nor to Mr. and Mrs. Charles, for they were good to me, and would understand why I could not see company of late."

"Then I may write to them, may I not, Mrs. Jennings, in your name, and ask them to come and have tea?"

"Of course, dear, if you think they would care to come."

"If they love you, of course they will care to come."

"They don't love me, Hero; it is only you, my child, who have managed to give me a little of that delicious elixir to cheer me in my old age."

"I am sure they like you, dear," said Hero in her loving voice, "and when they see you looking sweeter than any other old lady in London, why, their liking will soon grow into love. Now I am going to write the invitations immediately."

Hero rose as she spoke. She went to a pretty new davenport which stood near, opened it, took out some crested and addressed paper, and wrote notes in Mrs. Jennings' name to request the pleasure of Mr. and Mrs. Charles' company, and Miss Clarkson's company, to afternoon tea on the following Thursday.

Having written the letters, Hero stamped them; she then rang the bell, and a neat parlor maid appeared, who was given instructions to see that they were posted immediately.

"Now that is done," said Hero with a great sigh,

"and I can return in peace to my ruffling. Dear, you must wear your gray silk on Thursday."

"What about a new dress for yourself, Hero?"

"I won't have it, Mrs. Jennings; the dress I have on now fits me to perfection. I don't want on this occasion anything or anybody to eclipse you—you are to be the belle of the party, the sweetest and dearest old lady in the whole of London."

"Hero, you will really fill my mind with thoughts of vanity. Ought I, who am so near the end of my journey, to think of such things as fine clothes and company?"

"Why not? Why may you not be happy, and enjoy life on to the very end? And as to your thinking of fine clothes and company, why, your heart is full of kind thoughts—full to the brim. I know all about you. There is no person in real trouble or distress that you would not gladly help."

"If there is any trouble that I can help you out of, Hero, I should be only too delighted," said the little old lady after a pause.

Hero looked full up at her, her clear, bright-blue eyes gazed frankly into the shrewd eyes of the old lady.

"My child, you have a trouble—I see it in your face."

"It is about Barbara," said Hero.

"Barbara!" exclaimed Mrs. Jennings. "She is that nice young girl with whom you live. You and she occupy a flat together. Do you know, I feel jealous of Barbara? But for Barbara, you would not leave me night or day."

"I could never give Barbara up," answered Hero. "I think I love her best in all the world. She was

my friend when I was in great trouble and perplexity."

"You have never told me your own story, Hero."

"Oh, that can keep, Mrs. Jennings. But now, may I tell you just a little about Barbara?"

"Certainly, dear; I am all attention."

"Well, she is wonderfully clever. Do you know, although she is only sixteen, she has written a book, such a good book that it is going to be published. She is busy now all day correcting proofs. The book is to appear very shortly."

"Then I will tell you what we will do," said Mrs. Jennings, sitting up in her excitement, "you shall bring Barbara here on Thursday next to meet Miss Clarkson. Miss Clarkson will be delighted to make her acquaintance, and I am sure she could give your little friend valuable advice."

"I wonder if Barbara would like it?" said Hero in a thoughtful voice.

"She could not but be pleased. Miss Clarkson is one of the most celebrated poets of the day, and her novels also have made quite a stir. Oh, yes, she shall meet your friend, or cousin, or whatever Barbara is."

"Barbara is no relation, although I love her with all my heart," answered Hero.

"Be sure you insist on her coming on Thursday."

"I will ask her, Mrs. Jennings. I can never answer for Barbara, but I will do my utmost to get her to come."

"Do, child; I shall be delighted to make her acquaintance."

When Hero returned to the flat in Bloomsbury that evening she ran briskly upstairs. Barbara was, as

usual, bending over her proofs. She looked up now, when Hero came in, and spoke in an impatient and somewhat cross voice.

"I wish you would not bang the door; my head aches so dreadfully."

"Well, then, shut up your work, Barbara," said Hero. "How can you expect not to have headaches when you grind and grind, and hardly ever go out from morning to night?"

"It is easy for you to look bright," answered Barbara. "You have evidently fallen on your feet with that old lady, whoever she is."

"She is about the dearest old lady in the world," answered Hero. "She reminds me of Grannie—of Grannie if she would only be amiable, and let her heart speak. Grannie, as I have sometimes seen her in my dreams. Barbara, shut up those proofs, for I want to speak to you; I have got quite an interesting piece of news for you."

"Well, then, wait a moment. I must correct this sentence."

Barbara bent forward again over her work. She was thinking hard, and her dark brows were knit together in a frown which looked almost angry. After a moment she made a satisfactory correction, and leaned back with a sigh.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, Barbara, I really begin to consider myself a sort of fairy princess. I have effected such wonders in Eaton Square. My dear old lady is properly dressed, the house has got its full complement of servants, the rooms are thrown open, and now at last, when all things are ready, hey, presto! the company begin to arrive. Our first tea-party takes place on

Thursday, and you, Babs—you, Babs, darling—are invited as one of the guests."

"You know I cannot possibly go, Hero. What clothes have I to wear at a house in Eaton Square?"

"You must have a proper dress," said Hero. "You surely have a little money of your own?"

"None whatever to spend on finery. I cannot go."

"You shall—I insist upon it. Barbara, it is more important than you think—you are to meet an author there, a very celebrated author."

"An author?" said Barbara, looking interested.

"No less a person than Miss Clarkson, the poet, who lives also in Eaton Square."

"Clarkson," said Barbara; "of course I know her name. I have read several of her poems—they are splendid. You don't mean to say that she is invited?"

"Yes; and I hope she will come. She used to be a great friend of Mrs. Jennings. I told Mrs. Jennings to-day that you, my dear, wonderful Babs, had written a book yourself, and then she said at once that you must meet Miss Clarkson. She will be awfully offended if you do not come, and so shall I. You will promise, won't you?"

"I should like to meet Miss Clarkson," said Barbara, "but, as I said just now, without any exaggeration, I have nothing to wear."

"But there is that dress of mine, nearly new—that pretty, soft gray silk. You know I don't want it a bit, now that Mrs. Jennings has taken it into her head to clothe me. It can be altered a little for you, and we certainly can afford a new hat. Now, Barbara, darling, to please me!"

"Hero, you are a great coax."

"I know I am, and I always mean to succeed. I was not named after one of Shakspere's most bewitching heroines for nothing."

"I don't believe you were, you extraordinary girl. I think, on the whole, I shall be able to go."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LEADING SERIAL IN "THE PALM BRANCH"

Hero was much excited about Barbara's dress. The gray silk happened to be nearly new, and was of a very soft, becoming color. Barbara's figure and Hero's were so nearly alike that each could wear the other's clothes; but the hat was the puzzle. Gloves must also be got, pretty and suitable ruffles of lace, neat boots—in short, the ordinary etceteras which make up the dress of a girl who goes into society. Hero was determined not to worry Barbara about it, but the thought of these clothes clouded her own bright little face, and on Wednesday morning Mrs. Jennings noticed the change.

"What is it, Hero? Something is putting you out."

"I am thinking about Barbara. I cannot dress her to my mind."

"If that is all——" began Mrs. Jennings.

"No, dear, you must not go on," said Hero impulsively. "Barbara would be furious if you offered what I know, in the kindness of your heart, you think of doing. No, she must be dressed out of our own money; but I am so anxious that she should look nice."

"Is she a pretty girl, my love?"

"Well, I, of course, think that she has the dearest and nicest face in the world. She is very intelligent-

looking, and very much out of the common, but I don't suppose, strictly speaking, that she is exactly a beauty."

"Is she dark or fair?"

"Oh, very dark. She has big, beautiful eyes, and a splendid broad forehead. Of course, she is somewhat sallow in complexion, particularly since she came to live in London, and she is also at a rather awkward age; but if she were properly dressed, I don't think any one in the room would compare with her."

"Well, Hero, what does she particularly want? You may as well confide in me."

"A new hat, for one thing, and nice lace—good real lace to put around her neck; proper gloves to wear, and neat little shoes. Oh, dear! it is a worry not to have any money of one's own!"

"I could not help thinking lately," said Mrs. Jennings after a pause, "how very silly I was to buy all that new lace for myself when I have got no end of valuable lace in an old trunk in the attic upstairs."

"Have you, Mrs. Jennings—real lace?"

"Beautiful lace, my love. I have also a great many ostrich feathers. I used to go into society a good deal years and years ago. When I gave it up I got rid of most of my fine things, but I remember taking the feathers out of several hats and bonnets and putting the lace away. Hero, suppose I were to give you the key of that trunk, and suppose——"

"Yes?" said Hero, her eyes sparkling.

Mrs. Jennings put her hand into her pocket and took out the key.

Hero took it without a word. Then she burst into the gayest of laughs.

"I quite understand," she exclaimed. "I will borrow for Barbara, and Barbara shall never know."

She left the drawing-room eagerly, ran upstairs, found the old trunk in the disused attic, opened it, and took out enough suitable lace and one or two splendid long, black ostrich feathers.

With the feathers made into a small parcel, she sallied forth to the nearest milliner.

"I want to see a broad, plain, black hat," she said.

The woman showed her one.

"I want you to trim it, please, with these feathers, and to curl them, too, a little. They are worth a great deal of money, are they not?"

"They are splendid feathers, miss," answered the woman. "They will make the hat look beautiful."

"How soon can it be finished?"

"It can go home to-day, miss. Where shall I send it?"

Hero gave the humble address in Bloomsbury, and then, finding she had enough money in her purse to buy pretty gray gloves the exact color of the silk dress, and a neat pair of shoes, with steel buckles, she ordered these also to be sent to the flat.

When she returned to Mrs. Jennings' drawing-room she made up ruffles for Barbara's neck and wrists, and took them home with her that night.

Accordingly, when Thursday dawned, a dress was provided for Barbara in all respects suitable for a young girl of her age and station.

"What a really pretty hat!" she said, noticing the droop of the splendid feathers. "I hope, Hero, it did not cost a great deal."

"Dear me, no; it was as cheap as possible," said Hero, choking back the laughter which was bubbling

up in her throat. "Now, Babs, sit down; I want to arrange your hair."

"Oh, do leave my old locks alone," said Barbara, almost impatiently. "You don't know how I hate having my hair pulled about."

"I shall insist on its being done fashionably," said Hero. "You wear it so flat to your head. You know you have got lovely hair, and quantities of it. Here, sit down; no more remonstrances! Remember this is my party."

"I feel almost sorry that I am going," said Barbara. "I don't know why I am nervous; I have been nervous for some little time lately."

"You will be all right when your book is published. Oh, how I long for it! And you will send Rosamond a copy, will you not?"

"Do you know, Hero," said Barbara, turning around to face her friend as she spoke—"do you know that on the very day the book is published the three months will be up? I promised faithfully to write to Rosamond at the end of three months to tell her if the experiment had turned out a success or a failure."

"Of course it has turned out a big success," said Hero. "I am as happy as possible; and you ought to be, Barbara, if you are not. I wonder," she added, a tinge of anxiety coming into her voice, "what Rosamond will do when she really knows where we are? Will she insist on going to see Grannie? And will Grannie send for me to return to The Hall? Oh, Barbara, dear, I could never stand the dreadful, dull, aimless life at The Hall again!"

Barbara sighed and did not reply. Her thoughts were evidently far away. After a time she made a grimace.

"Hero, do you like me with that great lump sticking out at the back of my head?"

"It is fashionable," said Hero. "One must sacrifice something to fashion. Your hair is beautifully done. I think I have quite a turn for hairdressing. Now I am going to fluff it out a little bit around your forehead."

"I won't have it curled, Hero; that I do draw the line at!"

"Well, well, I suppose I must please you. Now try on the hat."

The large black hat, with its splendid feathers, was all that was becoming. The gray dress, also, was transformed with its ruffles of beautiful lace. The gray gloves covered Barbara's somewhat bony hands; the shoes fitted her feet to perfection.

"And now, here is my last and greatest surprise," said Hero, bringing forward a lovely bunch of scarlet geraniums. "You are to pin those here," she said. "I bought them for you out of my own money this morning. Now, if you don't look just every bit as nice as anybody else at Mrs. Jennings', my name is not Hero Chevening."

The girls drove to the entertainment in a hansom. They arrived a little before the rest of the guests, and Hero ushered her friend upstairs, her heart beating quickly as she did so.

"I only hope Mrs. Jennings won't like you better than me," she said, as she pushed open the door. "But, after all, I forgot—it is not Mrs. Jennings we have to consider, but the dogs. Here they come. Now, then, Pet, stand back this minute! No jumping at me, remember. Duke, your paw, please."

Duke held out his paw in a most regal manner. Pet stood back, snarling a little, and showing his

teeth as he regarded Barbara. The other dogs behaved better. Barbara was then brought forward to be introduced to Mrs. Jennings, who, in her rich gray silk, seated in her favorite arm-chair, looked as sweet as an old lady could look. She talked very kindly to Barbara, who sat on a low stool near her, and soon forgot all her shyness in the interest which Mrs. Jennings began to create.

Soon Dawson and the new parlor maid appeared with the tea, and Hero jumped up to get everything into perfect order. Then the pealing of the front door-bell was heard through the house, and a moment later Mr. and Mrs. Charles—an elderly, good-humored, ordinary couple—made their appearance. They were delighted to see Mrs. Jennings, and seated themselves one on each side of the little, old lady. After the first glance, they took no special notice of Hero and Barbara, and the girls retired to the background to talk together, until the door was once more opened, and Miss Clarkson was announced.

When she entered the room, Barbara gave a most perceptible start. A flood of color rushed into her cheeks, leaving them the next moment ghastly pale. It needed but one frightened glance to show her that Miss Clarkson was the lady who used to sit by her side day after day at the British Museum. Her heart beat wildly; then it seemed almost to stop.

"Babs! what is the matter? You look ill. Is the room too hot?" asked Hero.

"Take no notice of me, Hero; I shall be all right in a moment. I'll just go to the other end of the room," said Barbara.

She rose and walked to the far end of the drawing-room. Mrs. Jennings' voice, however, somewhat shrill and piercing, followed her into her retirement.

"Miss Underhill! Come here, my dear. I am particularly anxious to introduce you to my great friend, Miss Clarkson. Miss Clarkson, you will be interested in this young girl when I tell you that, child as she looks, she has not only written a book, but that it is about to be published in a few days."

"I am much interested, of course," said Miss Clarkson.

As she spoke she raised her eyes and gave Barbara an attentive glance. Instantly she recognized her.

"Why, I know you!" she exclaimed. "You have been my neighbor for weeks past at the British Museum. Let us find chairs and have a long chat. I am very glad to make your acquaintance."

Miss Clarkson rose, and Barbara was forced to follow her. The elder lady sat down on a small sofa in the inner drawing-room, and made a place for her young companion by her side. Barbara felt as if she were in a dream.

"Now," said Miss Clarkson, "we can have a real cosy talk. I have often wondered what you were doing when you worked so hard day after day. You looked so much younger, and—forgive me!—so much more enthusiastic than most of the readers at the Museum. Do you remember when I spoke to you at the buffet one day? And can you recall when I dropped that sheet of my manuscript?"

Barbara bowed her head. Yes, she could recall everything. She remembered the time; she knew the incident of the lost page.

Just then Hero appeared in sight.

"What a pretty girl!" exclaimed Miss Clarkson. "Is she a friend of yours?"

"My greatest friend in the world. Her name is Hero Chevening," answered Barbara, somewhat ea-

gerly. She was only too glad to turn the conversation from herself.

"Chevening," repeated Miss Clarkson in a meditative and interested voice. "I once knew some one of that name. Of course, it cannot be any relation; but the name is an uncommon one."

Her brows became knit in an anxious frown.

"She is a beautiful girl," she repeated, "and she reminds me——"

Barbara did not say anything. She was not interested in Miss Clarkson's reminiscences; all her thoughts were turned on herself and on the book which was so soon to appear.

Hero brought some tea and cake, said a few words to Miss Clarkson, and then went back to attend to the other guests.

"About that page of manuscript," continued Miss Clarkson, as she sipped her tea, and turned her large, dreamy, thoughtful eyes full upon Barbara's face.

"I hope you did not miss it," said Barbara.

"I rewrote it, as I think I told you. The loss worried me at the time, for the page was an important one. In it I first introduced the great idea of my novel. Now, please tell me about your own book."

"I have nothing to tell," answered Barbara. "It is a girl's first book."

"But you have found a publisher for it?"

"Yes."

"May I ask the name?"

"It was partly through Mr. Mason, of the reading-room," continued Barbara, flushing and trembling, and then feeling as if something impelled her to speak. "He read my manuscript—it was not very

long—then he gave me an introduction to his friend, Mr. Parkinson."

"You don't mean Mr. Parkinson, the publisher in Cheapside? Is he going to bring out your book?" interrupted Miss Clarkson in astonishment.

"Yes."

"Do you know, my dear, that you have made a great success?"

"Have I? Of course, I ought to be very glad. Mr. Parkinson was kind—he told me, by the way, that he is just issuing a new monthly."

"I know all about that; I am writing for it."

"Are you?" answered Barbara. "How interesting!"

"May I ask, Miss Underhill, if your story is to appear in *The Palm Branch?*"

"Mr. Parkinson says it would not be suitable; it is to come out as a book."

"Well, my dear, I heartily congratulate you. Mr. Parkinson must think a great deal of your story, or he would not bring it out in that way. I shall read your book with pleasure when it does appear."

"Oh, please don't! I would much rather you did not."

"Why so? Of course I shall read it. Is it to be published this year?"

"It will be out in about a week," said Barbara, coloring and then turning white.

"Well, I hope the reviewers will be kind to you, my dear young lady; but, whether they are or not, please take the opinion of an old woman, and don't mind a single word they say. When I was young, and my first book appeared, I remember I used to shut myself up in my room for a whole day when I received an adverse criticism. Now, I assure you, I don't

give the critics a thought. As a rule, they know very much less than the writers whom they condemn; indeed, I believe that many of them are only unsuccessful authors themselves. However, that is neither here nor there. What is one man's food is another man's poison, and that we see in the case of reviewers more and more plainly every day. Don't fret overmuch, my dear, if the critics slang you, and don't be over-elated if they praise you. The public are the real test, Miss Underhill. If the public like your book, they will read it; and if they read it they will buy it; and if they buy it, and if your book sells—why, then, if you want money, you will have it."

"Of course I want money—very badly indeed," answered Barbara.

Miss Clarkson looked at her all over from head to foot.

"Do you live alone in London," she asked, "or with your parents?"

"I live with Hero Chevening; we have a little flat between us," answered Barbara.

"How interesting! I wonder if you would allow me to come to see you?"

"I should be delighted, of course, but——" Barbara hesitated, and looked confused.

"I know what you mean. You are very busy all day. I won't come to see you first; you shall come to me. Will you spend next Sunday with me?"

"I am afraid it is impossible," answered Barbara. She half rose from her seat, and then sat down again.

"Why so? You surely do not work on Sunday?"

"No, but"—Barbara's lips quivered—"please don't think me nasty," she continued; "I really don't mean to be; but I made up my mind, when I came to town,

that I would devote myself to work, and work only, and Sunday is the only day which I have with Hero."

"But your pretty friend shall come, too. Do you know that I have a great sympathy for girls like you? I am devoted to work myself, and quite understand enthusiasm in others. Miss Underhill, you will forgive me—you are overdoing it."

"I don't think so," answered Barbara.

"But I know better. Why are there such heavy lines under your eyes, and why do you look so downcast?"

Barbara's lips trembled; she had the greatest difficulty in keeping her composure.

"Now, I tell you what," said Miss Clarkson, "I shall insist upon a visit. I will take no denial. Ah! there you are, Miss Chevening! Please come here for a moment."

"Yes; what is it?" asked Hero, skipping forward.

"Miss Chevening, I want you to help me. I am anxious that your friend, Miss Underhill, and you, also, should spend next Sunday with me. Miss Underhill refuses on the plea that she has got so much work to do."

"It is true—you know it is true, Hero," said Barbara in a voice of agony.

"But if she works like this she will be ill," said Miss Clarkson. "Now, if you and she will come to me, you shall have a nice, long, quiet day, and I can give her a good deal of advice and some hints as well. You see, she and I are in the same profession; we ought to be friends, ought we not? I want you to persuade her to come."

"Of course I shall insist on her coming," said Hero with a laugh. "Miss Clarkson, leave it to me;

we will both appear next Sunday at your house. Yes, Barbara; there is no use in your frowning at me."

"That is a very nice girl," said Miss Clarkson, as Hero flew off, "and what a likeness! But now, my dear Miss Underhill, to turn to yourself. You have been good enough to confide in me, although I see you have done so a little unwillingly. Now I will tell you about my own work. I am completing the novel which you saw me working at for the last few weeks at the British Museum. Mr. Parkinson will receive the entire manuscript next week, and then I am going away for a long holiday."

"You have written a novel," faltered Barbara, "and you are sending it to—to Mr. Parkinson?"

"Yes; it is to be the leading serial in his new monthly, *The Palm Branch*. I flatter myself that I have introduced a completely new idea, and—— Oh, but, Miss Underhill, this will never do! You are quite faint!"

"The room is hot," answered Barbara. "If you will excuse me, I will go out on the landing. Please don't say a word to Hero; please do not follow me. I shall be all right when I am alone."

The miserable girl managed, how she never knew, to totter out of the room.

CHAPTER XXV

TWO RUNAWAYS

EARLY the following morning, just after Mrs. Jennings had come down to her drawing-room, the parlor maid threw open the door and announced Miss Clarkson.

Miss Clarkson came eagerly up to the old lady.

"I cannot tell you with what pleasure I renewed our acquaintance yesterday," she said. "And now I am anxious to see you by yourself. Would it be possible for you to give me a few moments quite alone?"

"Certainly," answered Mrs. Jennings. "My little companion, Hero Chevening, is out at this moment with the dogs; she will not be back for quite half an hour."

"Then that is capital," said Miss Clarkson, drawing her chair close to Mrs. Jennings'. "Do you know, I have been thinking about you all night."

"That was very kind of you, Sylvia," said Mrs. Jennings.

"Ah!" exclaimed Miss Clarkson, "it is refreshing to hear myself called once again by my Christian name."

"You were good to me," continued Mrs. Jennings, laying her wrinkled hand upon her friend's arm, "but there were years when I could not bring myself to see

you—when I felt as if I could never face the world again. Now the revolution in this house and in my ways must astonish you."

"The revolution amazes, but it also delights me," said Miss Clarkson.

"It is, every scrap of it, owing to that extraordinary child, Hero Chevening."

"You bring me to the point when you speak of her," said Miss Clarkson. "Am I to understand that that charming little girl is nothing more nor less than your ordinary companion?"

"My companion? Bless her!" exclaimed Mrs. Jennings, "she is, indeed, far more than that. She is my ray of sunshine, my delight. She has turned my old age into a season of rejoicing—a land of Beulah. You understand, do you not, Sylvia?"

"I hope I do," answered Miss Clarkson. "I am not as old as you, my dear friend, but I also am getting on in years; I shall be sixty my next birthday."

"And I am over eighty; but I feel young since that child came into the house."

"Well, you occupied a great many of my thoughts last night," continued Miss Clarkson, "what with the memory of you and the old times, and the queer coincidence that you should have Hero Chevening absolutely staying in the house with you, and then my interview with that uncommon, overworked girl, Barbara Underhill."

"Oh! as to Barbara Underhill," replied Mrs. Jennings, the interest dying out of her voice, "she is only the girl with whom my Hero lives. They have taken a little flat together. So girlish and end of the century, is it not?"

"*Fin de siècle* is the right word," said Miss Clarkson with a smile.

"We need not go into that now, need we, old friend?"

"I am much interested in Barbara Underhill, because I am certain she is a very clever girl; but she is alone, and very inexperienced. She is overworking herself, and for some strange reason she is terribly unhappy."

"I did not notice her particularly," said Mrs. Jennings. "I thought," she added, "that you wanted to speak to me about Hero."

"So I do, presently; but I, on my part, am deeply interested in Barbara. Like me, she is an author, or is about to become one. She is not only going to publish a book, but the publisher is no other than my dear old friend, Mr. Parkinson."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Jennings, suppressing a yawn. "You will excuse me, Sylvia, but I know very little about the publishing world."

"True, dear; I forgot that. Well, I will not weary you about Barbara just now. To come to the real object of my visit, I want you to tell me all you know about your little friend, Hero."

"My dear Sylvia, it is no use; you are not going to get her from me. I have no doubt you would like her as a companion, or an amanuensis, or whatever you call it, but you have not the slightest chance of obtaining her services. We may as well be frank on that point from the first."

"Certainly, my dear friend, and I would not deprive you of her for a moment. What I wish to know is this, what Chevening is she? Has she anything to do with——"

"Oh, no! no! Nothing whatever," said Mrs. Jennings, holding up one of her hands with a look of keen distress.

"Are you certain?"

"My dear Sylvia, I am certain. The child came to me a couple of months ago and offered her services for the ridiculous sum of a pound a week. Yes, fancy that dear, bright, angelic creature, who has changed my whole life, only gets a pound a week for her invaluable services. But, of course, she has nothing whatever to do with the Chevenings of Chevening Hall."

"It seems strange to me," said Miss Clarkson, speaking slowly, and with a very thoughtful look on her face, "it seems very strange that Alexis Chevening's daughter should have come to this."

"What do you mean?"

"She must be his daughter, for she has such a remarkable look of him."

"Hero has a look of Alexis Chevening?" said Mrs. Jennings.

"My dear, where are your eyes? It is most remarkable. The same expression, the same beautiful mouth, only sweeter and firmer; that merry glance; that manner at once so captivating and so innocent; but I need not talk further. You, my dear Mrs. Jennings, know what Alexis was when he was young."

"Yes, dear Sylvia; none better. Come a little closer to me, Sylvia. Do you know that Alexis is coming here next week?"

"Is he, truly? Then, of course, he will recognize his daughter."

"Dear Sylvia, you were always one to take up strange ideas. The child has nothing whatever to do with him. She was introduced to me by a tiresome, commonplace girl of the name of Lucy Tregunter—the daughter of rich people who took a house in the Square for the season. Miss Tregunter happened to

call, and discovered that I wanted a companion in a hurry. She told me she knew a girl who she thought would suit me, and then she sent me that dear, bright little soul. As to poor Alexis' daughter, of course she lives down in the country with her grandmother. I often have wondered how the poor child was reared. You know, when I saw her last, she was quite a baby. Then came all the dreadful trouble, and Alexis had to leave London, and his poor wife—— Oh! do not let us talk of those times; it is too much for me. In one thing, at least, Sylvia, I know you are wrong; my little Hero has nothing whatever to do with Alexis' daughter."

Miss Clarkson did not say a word for a moment; then she slowly took from the depths of her pocket a worn leather case, out of which she extracted a letter.

"The moment I saw the child yesterday," she said, "I was struck by the intangible likeness. When I heard her name, I immediately connected the likeness with Alexis Chevening. Chevening is an uncommon name; Hero, for a girl, is a still more uncommon name. Don't you remember what a passion Alexis had for Shakspere and Shakspere's heroines? Now, my dear Mrs. Jennings, this letter was received by me exactly thirteen years ago. The letter itself does not greatly matter, but this sentence surely does."

As she spoke the good lady read aloud the following words:

"My dear wife is dead, and will not know of all these dark times; but when I think of my poor baby, Hero, my heart is completely broken."

Mrs. Jennings grew somewhat pale.

"Show me the words," she said.

Miss Clarkson pointed them out to her. She read them over slowly to herself.

" 'My poor baby, Hero,' " she repeated.

"You know," continued Miss Clarkson, hastily folding up the letter and putting it back into her pocketbook, "that Alexis did leave a child who went to live with her grandmother; he speaks of her in this letter under the name of Hero. Is it likely that there are two Hero Chevenings in the world?"

"No, it is not likely," said Mrs. Jennings after a long pause. "If this is the case--why, it will be in my power to do something, something to make up to that child for what she has done for me, for what her father has done for me. Please, Sylvia, have the goodness to leave me; your news has shaken me considerably, and I have much, very much to think over."

Miss Clarkson went away at once. She had plenty of tact, and knew by instinct that the object of her visit was accomplished.

When Hero came in with the dogs Mrs. Jennings stared at her a good deal, but scarcely spoke.

"Are you tired?" asked Hero.

"No, my dear love. Hero, I want to have a little talk with you."

Hero sat down with a slight sigh.

"Why do you sigh, darling? Is anything the matter?"

"I only sigh because I am happy. I did enjoy myself so much yesterday."

"Mr. and Mrs. Charles took a fancy to you, Hero; they have asked you to go and see them some afternoon. But not to-day, my darling; I want you all to myself to-day."

"I would not leave you for the world to-day," answered Hero; "you seem sad about something."

"I don't know that I am really sad. Come and sit close to me; I have a great deal to talk about. Hero, you are not in any sense of the word an ordinary companion to me."

"I do hope you are not going to send me away," said Hero.

"Child, you must know better! I think it would break my heart to part with you. No, I want to tell you something."

"Tell me anything, Mrs. Jennings," said Hero, raising her blue eyes and fixing them on her friend's face.

"You have made me a different woman, my love; you have turned my life into sunshine; you have stirred something within me which"—Mrs. Jennings' eyes filled with tears—"which I used to think was dead. Hero, I used to think my heart was dead, but I find now that it is alive; it beats in my breast; I feel better, stronger, more energetic for your bright influence. But, Hero, dear, you have never told me anything about your own life."

"There is nothing——" began Hero restlessly.

"You must have some story, dearest."

"I would rather not tell," said Hero, lowering her voice.

"Not to me—to the one who loves you so dearly?"

"All right, Mrs. Jennings; then you shall know. I don't think you will betray me. I am young, not quite sixteen. Barbara and I live in a little flat together. When first Barbara and I came to London she brought some money with her; the money was hers, not mine. It soon got spent; then I came to you, and you are paying me, and now Barbara will earn money by her books; we shall get on all right in the future."

"You are not telling me everything, Hero. I want to know about the time before you came to live in London."

"I would much rather not speak about that time," said Hero.

"But if I particularly wish it, my love?"

Hero lowered her eyes; her face was downcast.

Mrs. Jennings noticed the mobile and expressive little face, the long lashes, the straight nose, the firm, sweet lips.

Hero sprang suddenly to her feet.

"There is no real secret," she said. "The fact is, I used to live in the country; I was not very—I was not at all happy there, and Barbara and I determined —oh, I know you'll hate me for telling it to you, but, after all, I suppose you must know—and you won't betray me? I know you won't betray me! We are two runaways, Barbara and I. We both of us ran away from home; our people do not know where we are. We are, both of us, living in London unknown to our own people."

"Hero! A girl like you to do that!"

"I see what you think of me," answered Hero. Her eyes filled with tears; they ran down her cheeks.

Mrs. Jennings laid one of her wrinkled old hands on the young girl's arm.

"It is impossible for me to think anything very bad of you," she replied. "As you have told me so much, you may as well tell me everything. Now, I am going, on my part, to ask you a very direct question. Once, long ago, I knew a little girl. Her name was also Hero Chevening, and she——"

"Did the Hero Chevening you knew long, long ago, go to live at Chevening Hall?" asked Hero, her face turning first red and then white.

"Yes, my love; she went to live with my very old friend, Mrs. Chevening, her grandmother."

"Then I am that girl," answered Hero.

She flung herself on her knees beside her friend and buried her face in her lap.

CHAPTER XXVI

"I MAY EVEN BE SENT TO PRISON!"

"THIS is very wonderful news to me," said Mrs. Jennings, "and I may as well tell you at once, Hero, that it is likely to affect your whole future life. I am not able to tell you any more on the subject to-day, except to say that at one time I knew your grandmother well; I also knew your father and mother."

"Are my father and mother alive, Mrs. Jennings?"

"Your mother—poor, sweet, young soul!—has been long in her grave; your father is alive. My dear, I cannot say anything more at present. Get a book and read to yourself; I have a great deal to think over."

Hero retired into the back part of the drawing-room. She, also, was too excited to read. What did it all mean? What wonderful change was coming into her life?

She felt strangely excited, but she also owned to a sense of relief that Mrs. Jennings at last shared her secret.

By and by the time arrived for her to return to the flat in Bloomsbury. There she found Barbara, looking flushed and ill, lying back in the one easy-chair which the little sitting-room possessed.

"Are the proofs all through, Bab?" asked Hero, going up to her friend with great eagerness.

"No; I am not quite certain that I am going on with them," answered Barbara.

"What can you mean, Bab? You look very queer."

"I feel ill," answered Barbara. "You know how badly my head has ached for a long time; well, it aches more than ever to-day, and I am so confused and giddy that I can scarcely turn my attention to my work. And oh, Hero! the worst of it all is, that I begin to hate my own work. After all, what is a book? We think a great deal of it before it is published; but when it is about to appear it suddenly seems such a small and insignificant thing."

"But, Barbara, this book has been the one dream of your life!"

"I suppose it has," answered Barbara. "But I feel queer to-day; I don't know myself." She pressed her hand to her forehead, and looked around her in a distracted way.

"Hero," she said, springing suddenly to her feet, "I must confess something—I am a failure. I have made the most awful mess of everything!"

"How can you talk such nonsense," said Hero almost angrily, "when your book is just coming out?"

"Don't mention the book just now. You must go by yourself to Miss Clarkson's to-morrow, for I am not going with you."

"Why not? She will be dreadfully annoyed."

"I don't care; I don't want to see her again. I wish to forget her, to forget even that she exists. Oh, dear! those proofs ought to be finished to-night, for the book is to appear almost immediately; there is only the last sheet to do."

"Suppose I read it over?" said Hero.

"No, you could not manage; you do not under-

stand. Don't talk to me; I feel a shade better now; I must try to finish it myself, come what may."

Barbara drew up her chair once more to the little table, pressed one of her cheeks on her hand, and began to correct the last sheet of the forthcoming novel. Presently she threw down her pen.

"There!" she said, "it is done. My brain could not have stood the strain another moment."

"Shall I wrap it up for you and put it in the post?" asked Hero.

"I wonder whether I ought to post it, Hero, or whether it would be best, even at the eleventh hour, to give it up?"

"Really, Barbara, you must be mad!"

"Perhaps I am!" cried the excited girl. "It is my head; it aches so badly. Of course, it is too late to stop anything now. Yes, Hero, take the proofs to the post for me; put them into this envelope."

Hero did so deftly and quickly.

"When I come back I shall get tea for you," she said. "While you are drinking your tea I have a piece of news on my own account to impart."

Barbara did not say a word.

Hero left the flat. She returned in a few moments. The kettle was already boiling; she made some fragrant tea and gave Barbara a cup.

"Now you look better," said Hero.

"That is because the Rubicon is crossed," answered Barbara; her eyes were fixed gloomily on the little fire which burned brightly in the grate.

Hero gazed at her in puzzled wonder.

"When did you say your book was to appear?" she asked suddenly.

"Next week."

"And this is Saturday—so near! I wonder you are not more excited.

"I am worn out by excitement. Oh, please don't let us talk about it any more! Hero, after all, you don't understand my temperament."

"Really, Barbara, I am afraid I don't."

"You have been much more lucky than I have been, Hero, and yet you also did wrong. It was dreadfully wrong of us both—I see it now—it was terribly wrong of us to run away from home."

"Was it?" asked Hero. She raised her brows; a puzzled expression came between her eyes. "And yet I have never, never been unhappy about it," she said after a pause. "I have from the very first enjoyed my life here. These last three months have been delightful to me. Of course, lately, since you have looked really ill, things have not been quite so nice; but then I have Mrs. Jennings, and I love her dearly. Barbara, I said I had a piece of news for you."

"What is it?" asked Barbara in a low, indifferent voice.

"Mrs. Jennings has found out what Chevening I am."

"And does she know that you belong to Chevening Hall?"

"Yes! yes! She knows all about it. She questioned me to-day, and I had to let things out; I did not want to tell her, but I was forced to. Is it not strange? She used to know my father and mother, and even Grannie! Mrs. Jennings seemed very much startled—she said she had a great deal to think over, and that this knowledge might affect my whole life."

"I don't see, after all, that it matters," said Barbara, rising slowly as she spoke. "Hero, I think I shall go to bed."

"Do, pray; I will come in and see you when you are lying down."

Barbara crossed the room with the step of an old woman. She entered her own bedroom and shut the door. When she found herself alone she stood for a moment in the middle of the room.

"'Be sure thy sin will find thee out!'" she said then, slowly and half aloud.

There was a startled and terrified expression on her face. She pressed both her hands to her brows and uttered a groan.

"I have acted madly; everything will be discovered," she whispered to herself. "Mr. Parkinson is going to publish Miss Clarkson's novel in *The Palm Branch*. The central idea of my story and the central idea of hers are the same. He will know—oh, he will know—and the world will know! What am I to do? What am I to do? And now he has gone to the expense of putting my book through the press! Oh! can I ever be forgiven? I may even be sent to prison for this! Oh, what an awful scrape I have got into! Oh, my head! my head! Oh, if I could only live over again the last miserable weeks! What a wretched, wicked, wicked girl I am!"

She flung herself on her bed; her thoughts were now too confused to enable her to follow for long any consecutive line of reasoning.

CHAPTER XXVII

PAGE FORTY-EIGHT ONCE AGAIN

MEANWHILE, Rosamond was becoming more and more restless. The thought of Barbara pressed upon her mind day and night. At last she could stand her feelings no longer, and went one morning to see Mr. Johnson.

"I cannot wait to get news of Barbara," she said, looking full up into that gentleman's face. "She promised faithfully to let me know about herself at the end of three months, and the three months are nearly up; but I have had the strangest feeling of late —I cannot account for it—I am certain that Barbara is very unhappy. Anyhow, I have made up my mind to find her, if possible, without a moment's longer delay. Can you help me?"

Mr. Johnson shook his head.

"I wish I could," he answered, "but I do not know your sister's address."

"I thought, perhaps, she had written to you for more money."

"I have not had a line from her since she left. I am very sorry, Miss Rosamond."

Rosamond's face turned white. The lawyer gave her a long glance, then suddenly his own expression brightened.

"By the way!" he exclaimed, "you know Miss Tregunter, don't you?"

"Lucy Tregunter?" cried Rosamond. "I scarcely know her, but she used to be a great friend of Barbara's."

"So I thought. Her father is one of my clients. He was here yesterday, so I know that the Tregunters are at home at present. Lucy might possibly be able to give you information about your sister."

"So she might," answered Rosamond. "I'll go to see her immediately."

She left Mr. Johnson's house and went to the part of the town where Lucy lived. That young lady was at home, and after a very short catechism Rosamond succeeded in getting Barbara's address from her.

"As you ask for it, there is no earthly reason why I should withhold it from you," said Lucy. "I never, for my part, approved of your sister going off in that wholesale fashion. But I assure you, you need not be the least bit anxious about her. I saw her when I was in town, and from all I can hear she seems to be doing really well. Then as to her friend, Miss Chevening—oh, of course, Miss Chevening is with her—she has got, through my instrumentality, a capital post as companion to a lady in Eaton Square."

"Thank you for Barbara's address," replied Rosamond with a grave smile.

She was about to leave the room when Lucy called after her.

"They tell me that you are really succeeding with that wonderful farm of yours," she exclaimed.

"Yes, thank you; we are doing nicely."

"I am glad to hear it; I think you are very plucky. Well, do not be anxious about your sister."

Rosamond smiled again, but did not say anything more. She soon afterward left the house, and that night took the train to London.

Accordingly, very early on a certain Sunday morning, there came a knock at the door of Barbara's and Hero's little flat, and when Hero opened it, with a face full of consternation she saw Rosamond standing without.

"Oh, Rose!" she cried, her face completely altering in expression, and the relief in her eyes causing them fairly to dance, "what good angel has sent you here now?"

"I have come to see Barbara. I know by your face that there is something wrong," said Rosamond in alarm.

"I am afraid there is. Do come in at once, Rose. Yes, Barbara is ill. I cannot imagine what is the matter. She seemed very unlike herself last night before she went to bed, and now she scarcely knows any one. She keeps on repeating over and over the same words: 'Don't let the book be published—don't let the book be published.' Oh, Rosamond! I am afraid she has worked too hard. Rose! dear Rose! what will you think of me?"

"I think nothing bad of you, Hero," answered Rosamond, "but I must see Barbara without a moment's delay."

There was a determined, almost stern light in her usually kind eyes. She took off her hat and jacket and prepared to go into Barbara's room.

"Let me see her alone," she said. "I would rather go to her quite by myself."

"I will wait for you in the sitting-room until you come back," answered Hero.

Rosamond opened the door which divided the sitting-room from the bedroom, and went in. The room felt close and hot; the window was shut; there was little or no ventilation. Even before she glanced at

her sister, Rosamond went straight to the window and flung it wide open. She then approached the bedside.

Barbara was lying with her eyes shut, a deep flush of fever on either cheek, a frown between her dark brows. Rosamond knelt down by her side. A bottle of eau-de-cologne lay on a table near. Rosamond poured some into a basin, mixed it with water, and then, taking out her own handkerchief, wetted it in the liquid and laid the cool, fresh restorative on Barbara's hot brow. Then, for the first time, the thick lashes were raised, and the dark eyes looked full at Rosamond.

Barbara was too ill to show the least surprise at her sister's presence.

"Has the new cow come, Rose?" she said slowly. "And did you call it Cowslip? I recommended Cowslip as a nice name, did I not?"

"Yes, darling," answered Rosamond in a whisper.

"And how many chicks has Clementcy got now?"

"Too many to count, Barbara. Bab, I have come to take you back. I want you to return with me to the beautiful country."

"The beautiful country?" echoed Barbara in a puzzled voice. "But I am in the country. Rather tired of it, too; and this bird's-nest bedroom is—is so stifling. What is the matter with you, Rose? Why do you look at me with such a queer expression? Oh! now I remember. I am not in the country; I am in London. I don't like London—I hate it! Rose, I have made a mess of everything. Rose, I have failed —I have failed utterly. Oh, can you forgive me?—can you ever forgive me?"

"Whatever you have done, I fully and completely forgive you," answered Rose. "You are my own

darling sister, the one I love best in the whole world. Now, just stay quiet. I am going to nurse you. You will soon be yourself again."

The faintest of smiles dawned around Barbara's lips.

Rosamond knelt by her for a little longer. After a short time she rose to leave the room. She had just reached the door when Barbara called after her with a piercing cry:

"Rose! Don't go away! You have promised to save me—you will save me, won't you? You won't let that dreadful book be published!—you won't! Promise—promise me, Rose!"

"I don't quite understand what I am to promise, darling."

"It is about my book—the book I wrote—the book for which I have sold my soul! Please don't let it be published, Rose! Please promise! Go and see Mr. Parkinson your own self. Oh, Rose! they will send me to prison if that book is ever published!"

"I will do what I can for you, Barbara; you need not be frightened," answered Rosamond in a very grave voice. "Now stay quiet; I shall be back in a moment."

She entered the sitting-room, where Hero was anxiously awaiting her.

"Barbara is very ill indeed," said Rosamond. "We must have a doctor immediately."

"I'll go and fetch one," answered Hero.

"A good doctor, please," continued Rosamond.

"I'll ask the hall porter to recommend some one. I will bring a doctor back with me in less than half an hour."

Hero ran out of the sitting-room, and Rosamond returned to her sister's bedside.

Barbara was again in a state of half stupor; her eyes were closed; she took little or no notice of any one. Rosamond seated herself near; she hoped that Bab was going to sleep. Suddenly, however, she noticed that the big, dark eyes were fixed upon her face; they were full of the most passionate despair.

"Rose!" cried Barbara—she sat up in bed, stretching out her arms in a most imploring way to her sister—"if that book is published I shall be sent to prison! Promise, Rose—promise you will save me. Miss Clarkson can do it! Miss Clarkson can send me to prison if my book is ever published!"

These wild, and, to Rosamond, most extraordinary words, had scarcely left Barbara's lips before a grave, elderly-looking man slowly opened the door of the bedroom and came in. He was the doctor whom Hero had summoned. He bent over the patient, examined her critically, and then called Rosamond into the next room.

"Is that young girl your sister?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Rosamond.

"She will require the greatest care."

"I have come up to town on purpose to nurse her," answered Rosamond.

"You will probably want help; she is, I fear, going to be ill for a long time, and it is very likely to be a serious case. I don't see how you can manage alone. Now, I could have her admitted into a very nice hospital."

"I should not hear of it," answered Rosamond with sudden passion. "I will nurse her myself day and night; there is no fear that I shall break down. What do you expect will be the matter with her?"

"The symptoms point to serious brain disorder, but I am sure of nothing at such an early stage. Anyhow,

she is very ill. Of course, if you wish it, I will leave her in your hands for a day or so, and we will see how matters turn out. I will now write a prescription, and call again to see her in the evening."

When, at a late hour that afternoon, the doctor returned, he looked very grave indeed. Barbara was now quite delirious; her wild words filled the entire flat.

"Rose, save me! Oh, Rose, save me! Don't let Miss Clarkson see me! Dear, dear Rose! save me—save me!"

The doctor again beckoned Rosamond to follow him out of the room.

"I feared this morning there was something weighing on your sister's mind," he said; "I am now certain of it. Who is Miss Clarkson?"

"I don't know," answered Rosamond; "I never heard of her before."

"There is a Miss Clarkson whom all the world knows," said the doctor in a meditative voice. "I refer to the well-known poetess. Your sister cannot possibly mean her!"

"Yes, she does," said Hero, coming softly forward. "She met Miss Clarkson at the house of a friend of ours a day or two ago, and I noticed at the time that she was very much upset. Miss Clarkson invited us both to spend to-day with her. Barbara did not wish to accept."

At this moment the high, delirious voice of the sick girl was heard, piercing the thin wall which divided the sitting-room from the little bedroom.

"Save me, Rose! Oh, Rose, save me! If Miss Clarkson knows, she will send me to prison!"

"Until we get to the bottom of this mystery there

will be no rest nor chance of recovery for the patient," said the doctor. "Suppose you, Miss——"

"Chevening," said Hero, on whose face the medical man had fixed his eyes.

"Very well, suppose you, Miss Chevening, go to see Miss Clarkson?"

"That is a good thought," said Hero. "I know Miss Clarkson is very kind. I am quite certain, whatever is the matter, that Barbara has no real reason to be afraid of her. What reason could she have?"

"There is no answering that question," said the medical man in a wise voice. "My young patient has got something weighing very heavily on her mind, which principally accounts for the state of her health. Go at once, Miss Chevening, and see Miss Clarkson. She alone, it seems to me, has it in her power to relieve the mind of my patient."

The moment the doctor had left, Hero started for Eaton Square. She found Miss Clarkson at home, was admitted, and a moment afterward the lady came into the room where the young girl was waiting for her.

"My dear Hero Chevening," she said, coming forward with both her hands outstretched, "I am glad to see you. Your note, received this morning, was a disappointment. You said your young friend was ill; what is the matter with her?"

"She is very ill indeed," said Hero, "very ill."

"Do you know, I am scarcely surprised. I thought when I saw her the other day that she looked unwell; the shadows under her eyes were so heavy, and she appeared to be so nervous, so strained, so depressed."

"She has been in a very depressed, queer state for some time," answered Hero, "and I think," she added suddenly, "that meeting you, Miss Clarkson, was the

final straw. Certainly, since then she has been most unhappy. To-day we were obliged to send for a doctor, and he says she is very ill."

"I am truly sorry; I thought her a most interesting girl."

"She is a splendid girl," answered Hero, "but," she added, "at present I do not understand her."

"You must be very anxious if you are all alone with her. Can I do anything to help?"

"I believe you could help very much, and I am coming to that. But I am not alone with Barbara, for her sister Rosamond came up from the country this morning."

"Have you a good doctor?"

"Dr. Jephson."

"I know his name; he is an excellent man."

"He says that something is weighing on Barbara's mind," continued Hero, turning pale and then red. "Neither Rosamond nor I can make out what it is. She constantly mentions your name, Miss Clarkson."

"My name!" exclaimed Miss Clarkson. "What do you mean? Oh, I suppose the poor child is delirious. Does the doctor anticipate fever?"

"She is in fever at present; he is very much afraid that it may turn to some bad brain trouble. He says there is no chance of recovery until her mind is relieved. Neither Rosamond nor I can imagine what is the matter."

"And you say that she mentions my name?" said Miss Clarkson. "But she scarcely knows me."

"It is that fact which puzzles us both so dreadfully."

Miss Clarkson stood perfectly still; she was in deep and anxious thought.

Hero fixed her eyes on the lady's grave face.

"I am frightened about Barbara," exclaimed Hero. "Oh, I wonder, Miss Clarkson, if you are really, really kind! I fear—I don't know what I fear—but suppose Barbara had done something wrong, something wrong to you? Oh, I don't know anything, remember; but I fear, I fear dreadfully! I wonder if, if such is the case, are you the kind of person who would forgive her?"

"Have I lived over fifty years in the world, Hero Chevening, and have I been full of shortcomings myself, not to know how to forgive?" answered Miss Clarkson in a gentle voice. "Still," she added, "I am much puzzled—what can I possibly have to forgive in your poor little friend?"

"That is just what I can't tell you. The doctor says there is something weighing on Barbara's mind. Barbara is always calling out your name in most piteous accents. She says—yes, I must tell you everything—she says that you have it in your power to send her to prison. Oh, I am sure there is something at the bottom of it! You know, don't you, that she is about to publish a book?"

"Yes; she told me so the other day. Of course, I think her far too young to attempt anything of the sort; still, her prospects are brilliant."

"It has been the one dream of Barbara's life to bring out a book," continued Hero; "but, now that it is coming out, she is dreadfully unhappy about it. She cries out passionately that it must not be published; she says if it is, you will be able to send her to prison."

"Oh, that is folly!" replied Miss Clarkson in a sharp voice.

She turned her back as she spoke, and went to the nearest window. The sun had already set, and there

was a young moon in the heavens. The night was a very lovely one. Miss Clarkson looked up at what was visible of the sky from her window. As she did so, a memory flashed before her mind.

"Page forty-eight, which I never found, which I lost in such an extraordinary way," she thought; "page forty-eight."

She then came back and stood facing Hero.

"I will go and see your young friend," she said.

"Barbara is very ill; would it be the wisest thing to do?"

"It is the only thing to do," answered Miss Clarkson gravely. "I will go with you at once."

As she spoke she rang the bell.

"Whistle for a hansom directly, Morris," she said to the servant who answered her summons.

A very short time afterward Hero and Miss Clarkson arrived at Strawberry Mansions. They entered the little sitting-room. Rosamond was with her sister, whose high, excited voice could be heard all over the flat.

"Save me, Rose! Oh, Rose, I wish I had never come to London! I am punished now, Rose! What shall I do?"

"Please go very softly into the bedroom," whispered Miss Clarkson to Hero, "and ask your friend Rosamond to come here."

Hero obeyed.

Barbara was sitting up in bed, clasping her hands to her hot forehead.

"Is that you, Hero?" she cried out. "I feel just as if my head were going to burst. Has Mr. Parkinson published the book yet? Has a criticism appeared? Do they, do they know? Does all the world

know? Have they—has all the world found out what I have done?"

"Of course the book is not published yet, Barbara," answered Hero; "you know it is not to appear for some days. Now do lie quiet; I am going to sit by you. Rosamond, will you go into the sitting-room?"

Rosamond looked with wonder at Hero, then she rose to comply. In the next room she came face to face with Miss Clarkson.

Miss Clarkson went straight up to her and took one of her hands in hers.

"I know all about you," she said. "I am truly sorry for you. Light has broken in upon me with regard to your sister's illness. I think I can guess—at least, I can partly guess what is the matter. No, I am not going to tell you; I hope that you may never know. If my surmises are correct, the thing that troubles your poor sister lies between her and me, and one other person. In order to make quite sure, and in order to relieve her mind, I want, however, to ask you a question. Are there any proofs of the book so soon to appear which you could let me read?"

"Proofs?" said Rosamond in a bewildered way. "I saw a great many proofs lying on Barbara's desk this morning."

"Pray let me look them over. I can tell you if my surmises are correct in a very short time."

Rosamond handed the proofs to Miss Clarkson without another word. She watched her for a moment as she seated herself, untied the pile of loose papers, and began to read. Then she returned to the sickroom.

Barbara, exhausted now, had fallen into a heavy sleep; she moaned incessantly; her temperature went steadily up and up. In her broken sleep she talked

sometimes of the farm, sometimes of the old life at Miss Motley's, but far oftener of her recent three months in London; of the British Museum, of Miss Clarkson, of Mr. Parkinson, of the book which was now such an agony to her mind.

At the end of half an hour Rosamond returned to the sitting-room. She found Miss Clarkson standing, very pale and still, by one of the tables.

"I understand everything," she said. "I should like to see your sister; is she awake?"

"She is in a heavy sleep at present," answered Rosamond. "Her temperature seems to get higher and higher."

"Is Dr. Jephson going to call again?"

"He said he would look in late."

"Will you have the goodness to send for him immediately?"

"Is it necessary?" asked Rosamond.

"I want to see him. It is very necessary for me to see your sister, and yet I would rather have his authority before doing so."

Rosamond ran out of the room; she sent a messenger to Dr. Jephson's house. In twenty minutes the doctor stood in the little sitting-room. Miss Clarkson saw him alone.

"I understand what is troubling your patient," she said at once.

"Ah! I hoped you would," answered the good doctor. "She is very ill, Miss Clarkson; she has a load on her mind."

"She has; I know what it is. I believe I can relieve her if you will allow me to see her for a few minutes."

"Your very name excites her," replied the doctor; "still——"

"Believe me, it will not excite her long. I am certain that I can give her the greatest possible relief."

"If that is so, she must see you at all risks," said the doctor. He entered the sickroom, returning in the course of a few moments.

"My patient is awake," he said. "I have asked her sister and young friend to leave you alone with her. I will stay in this room until you return."

Without a word Miss Clarkson opened the door of the bedroom and went in.

Barbara was again sitting up in bed. She was looking anxiously toward the door. When she saw Miss Clarkson she turned white as death, her lips trembled, a faint, half-smothered shriek rose to her lips.

Miss Clarkson instantly laid her hand on her arm.

"My dear child," she said, "you have nothing to be frightened about. I know everything. Now just listen to me. You took away page forty-eight of my manuscript, and, my dear, you were tempted, and you used it for the purposes of your own story. You are too ill for me to say a word of reproach to you now. God Himself has punished you, so do not expect me to punish you in any way. You don't wish your book to be published? It had certainly better not be published yet. Some day, Barbara, you will write, and write well—some day when you are older. I have read a good deal of your book in proof, and I can see that, quite apart from the idea that you have taken from me, you have talent of your own—talent which may become of value by and by. Now, Barbara, listen to me attentively; please understand that I absolutely and completely forgive you. Tomorrow morning, at an early hour, I will see Mr. Par-

kinson, and I will arrange matters with him. The book will not appear at present. Your sister and your friend need never know why it is not coming out; only Mr. Parkinson, you, and I, will be in the secret. And when you are well again, Barbara—which I hope you soon will be—you must consider me as your friend. You must come to see me, and I will help you; I will do all in my power for you. Now kiss me; I pity you and fully forgive you."

Miss Clarkson spoke so quietly, and yet with such strength, that Barbara's very agitation was soothed.

"Is it true, is it possible, that you know everything—that you know the very worst? You know that I am a thief—that I stole your great idea?" gasped the little girl.

"I know everything," replied Miss Clarkson. "You were tempted, and you fell. Now, lie down and go to sleep; no ill consequences will follow."

As she spoke, Miss Clarkson bent over Barbara and kissed her. A moment later she had entered the sitting-room.

"I think, doctor," she said, with something like tears in her fine eyes, "that your patient's mind is greatly relieved. I believe she will have a good night, and will soon drop asleep."

This happened to be the case. Before midnight Barbara's temperature had gone down several degrees; the next morning she was much better, and the dreaded illness was averted.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL"

BARBARA quickly got better; but about this time Hero noticed that Mrs. Jennings did not look at all well—that, notwithstanding her beautiful dress and her beautiful house, an anxious expression, which was certainly anything but good for her, sat constantly upon her brow. She did not eat her food as she used to; she seemed to take little or no interest in anything; often Hero caught her murmuring sad words half aloud. But she was by nature a very unselfish old lady; and when "her child," as she called Hero, was in the room she always made a great effort to be cheerful. Hero's very sympathetic nature, however, could not stand this for long. She must find out what was the matter. One afternoon she looked anxiously into the old eyes which held their secret so valiantly, and spoke:

"Mrs. Jennings," she said, "something is the matter with you. You are not what you were a fortnight ago."

"No, my darling; life changes from day to day."

"Yes; but it is rather more than an ordinary change which ails you just now. You have told me more than once that I am like your child or your grandchild, and yet you will bear this trouble without telling me what it is. I don't think it is kind of you."

"I am thinking," answered Mrs. Jennings slowly,

"of a friend who is coming so soon to see me. I have looked forward for months—nay, I may say years, to his return; and now the time has really arrived—we shall meet to-morrow."

"Of course, I have known for a long time that your friend was coming," replied Hero. "It was really on his account we bought the dresses, and made the house look so smart, and you began to receive your old acquaintances again. But why should that make you unhappy?"

"I will tell you something, Hero—something, but not all. Within the last few days I have made a very strange, and, to me, a very terrible discovery. The man whom I am so soon to see again has always been much loved by me, but I never knew until the last few days what he had done for me and mine. Last week, in looking through some of my old belongings, I came across a letter which I ought to have received long ago. I opened it. It gave me information. That information is good for the living—yes, it is good for the living—but black, black for one who has passed away, and it hurts me to my heart's core."

"I am very sorry," answered Hero.

"The strange thing is this," continued Mrs. Jennings, "that you, Hero, ought to rejoice—nay, that by and by you will greatly rejoice—at the discovery which I have made. Although it makes me sad for myself, it makes me very proud for the man whom I am so soon to see again; and it makes me love you, my darling, better than ever. Now, will you, please, promise not to be overcurious, and just do what I want?"

"I will certainly try to do that."

"I wish you to leave London with me to-morrow morning."

"To leave London?" repeated Hero, growing a little pale. "But are you strong enough?"

"Of course I am, child; nothing really ails me. I wish us both to go into the country to-morrow."

"Are we to return the same day?"

"That is scarcely likely, but I can say nothing positive. Our expedition, Hero, is a strange one; and what the issue will be, God only knows! If it is what I expect, your life, at least, will be completely altered, and—but I can say no more now. Give me a kiss, and do not ask questions."

"Mrs. Jennings must have a terrible anxiety on her mind," thought Hero to herself, "for she has not once to-day spoken to the dogs. I wonder what can be wrong. Well, whatever it is, I mean to stick to her to the very end; I don't think there is any one like her in the world."

The next day at an early hour Hero softly left the little flat in Strawberry Mansions. She hailed a hansom and drove at once to Eaton Square.

Mrs. Jennings was up and dressed. She seemed to have cast her anxiety behind her, for she looked at that moment as bright and graceful and old-picturey as ever a woman over eighty could manage to look. The weather was now sufficiently cold for her to wear some handsome furs which Hero had insisted on her purchasing; and her snow-white, thick hair, piled high above her aristocratic, dark, little face, suited her to perfection.

A landau, with a pair of spirited horses, was standing at the door, and Hero and the old lady got in at once. They drove straight to Paddington, and there, to Hero's astonishment and consternation, she heard Mrs. Jennings ask for tickets to Charlton.

"But why are we going there?" she whispered, turning pale as she spoke.

"It is all right, dear; you will know presently," replied Mrs. Jennings.

They traveled down to Charlton first class, and reached that somewhat antiquated little town within a couple of hours.

Here a tall, dark-eyed, somewhat elderly-looking man was waiting to receive them on the platform. The moment he saw Mrs. Jennings he came impulsively forward, took off his hat, and, taking her hand, placed it on his arm.

"At last we meet," he said in a low tone.

"At last, Alexis," she replied.

She was trembling visibly now, and seemed to find it impossible to get out another word. Hero walked gravely by her side; but the stranger's face fascinated her, and caused her heart to beat in a very irregular manner. The next moment the color flooded her cheeks, for the strange man's dark eyes were fixed on her face with the queerest expression she had ever encountered.

"Yes, Alexis, this is Hero," said Mrs. Jennings. "I will explain everything when we get into the carriage. You have arranged for a carriage to meet us, have you not?"

"I have arranged everything," he replied.

"And you received my letter safely?"

"I received your very astonishing letter, with the news which I never, never meant you to know."

"Thank Heaven!" answered Mrs. Jennings, "I was not permitted to go down to my grave without doing my utmost to repair that sin, without doing my little best to put that grave wrong right. Oh, Alexis!

when I look at you—when I think of what you have suffered!"

"Never mind that now; it is all over," he replied.

He drew her hand through his arm, smiled at Hero, and led them both to the carriage.

Hero's heart was beating more and more wildly; she felt as if she were in a dream. Excitement blazed in her pretty eyes; a beautiful rose bloom mantled her cheeks. The moment the three entered the carriage the coachman drove rapidly off. Hero, who was generally so outspoken, so brave, so little influenced by shyness, felt as if she were tongue-tied. She longed to ask where they were going, and who this queer, fascinating, unknown man was. Why did he look at her in that sort of greedy way, and why, above all things, did she feel unable to return his glance? She felt suddenly afraid, as she had never yet felt afraid in the whole course of her life, and yet her fear was mingled with a queer, wonderful sense of joy.

They drove along familiar roads, but Hero never noticed them. Mrs. Jennings and the strange gentleman sat facing the horses; Hero occupied the little seat opposite. She wondered restlessly when the drive would come to an end. Mrs. Jennings scarcely spoke a word, but the stranger held her hand clasped in his.

At last they stopped before high iron gates. A woman ran out, dropped a curtsey, and opened the gates wide. Then Hero found her voice again. She uttered a scream, half of excitement, and half of pain.

"Oh, Mrs. Jennings!" she said, "you are not taking me back to The Hall? This is Chevening Hall! I did not think—I did not think you would be cruel enough to do that!"

The terrible tension of the excited girl's feelings was suddenly relieved, and she gave way to a burst of tears.

"I don't wish to go back to The Hall again!" she gasped. "I was miserable at The Hall!"

A great lump rose in her throat.

"I cannot keep it to myself any longer, Mrs. Jennings," said the stranger. "Hero, darling, you won't be miserable at The Hall if I am there."

He put his arms around her. Without knowing how or why, she found herself sobbing out her grief on his breast.

"But who are you?" she said at last. "I never saw any one like you, I never felt to any one as I feel to you. What is the matter with me? Oh, I shall choke, unless some one tells me what all this means, and at once!"

"Poor child! poor child! You are all right now. I am your father, Hero—your long-lost father."

Then Hero glanced at Mrs. Jennings, and Mrs. Jennings smiled.

"I meant it to be a great surprise to you, darling," she said.

"Give me a kiss of your own accord, Hero," said her father.

Hero raised her lips. Mr. Chevening pushed back the hair from her forehead.

"You really are my own child; you are the image of your mother," he said.

"But what does this mean?" said the little girl at last, speaking almost impatiently in her excitement. "I am half stunned. So you are my father, and you are alive, and we are going back to The Hall? But, oh, father, please don't leave me alone with Grannie ever again!"

"You are my charge in future," said the man. He spoke in a deep voice with a tone of authority about it. When he uttered these words every scrap of fear and sorrow left Hero's heart; it was exactly as if the sun had come out, and all the birds of heaven had begun to sing together. She could not help giving a glad little laugh in the excess of her emotion. As she did so the carriage drew up abruptly at the bottom of the steps which led to the front entrance of the old house. Waiting for them on the steps, stood Mrs. Gunning and the old servant, Frances.

Mr. Chevening immediately gave his arm to Mrs. Jennings, who leaned on it, trembling a good deal, but his right hand was still locked within one of Hero's.

The three began to mount the steps. The moment they did so Frances dropped a curtsey; but Mrs. Gunning's face looked pale and frightened. Neither of them seemed to have eyes or ears for any one but the stranger. Mrs. Jennings herself did not make the slightest impression; while as to Hero, her return seemed to be as commonplace, as every-day a matter, as if English girls were in the habit of running away from home and coming back again when it pleased them. The two women gazed at the tall, handsome stranger as if they would devour him.

"It is all right," said Mrs. Gunning, speaking now to Mrs. Jennings. "I received your letter, and I have done exactly what you wished. If you walk straight into her room she will not be able to refuse you admission. I do not know in the least what it will do to her; it may kill her; but, of course, it is no affair of mine; you will please understand that; you will try to explain that presently, will you not?"

"I perfectly understand, Gunning," replied Mrs.

Jennings in a haughty tone, which Hero had never heard her friend use before. "Now," continued the old lady, turning to Frances, "you will have the goodness to take us immediately to your mistress."

Frances started.

"I will do it, of course," she said, "although it is almost as much as my place is worth."

"Well, don't talk, but obey," said Mrs. Jennings. "No more suspense, please; we all wish to see Mrs. Chevening without a moment's delay."

Frances turned to lead the way, and the little party followed her. They went down the long stone corridor which poor Rosamond had traversed with such mixed feelings on a certain day not very long ago. They passed through the two outer rooms which led into the old lady's sitting-room, and then the well-known curtain was pushed aside, and Hero found herself once again face to face with her grandmother.

To all appearances, not a day had gone over Mrs. Chevening's head. She was seated in the same arm-chair; she wore the same cap, the same dress. The same expression, somewhat hard, somewhat proud, a little bit troubled, if any one had looked deep enough, still rested on her features; she was very erect, as was her fashion, not dreaming of leaning back, but quietly going on with her knitting and glancing out of the window from time to time.

When the door was slowly opened, and Mrs. Jennings, Hero and her father entered the room, Mrs. Chevening turned her head very slowly. The first person her eyes lighted upon was Hero. The moment she looked at her, her whole face underwent a curious and somewhat intangible change; it seemed as if a mask had fallen over it. Every scrap of feeling went out of it, the eyes became hard and cold, the

tremulous, half-sorrowful expression left the lips; they shut tight in a hard, straight line. Mrs. Chevening was just about to speak, when her eyes roamed a little higher; suddenly they rested on the gray hairs and much-lined face of a middle-aged man; then she tottered to her feet, covered her face with her hands, and uttered a groan.

"No, Alexis! this is too much; too much!" she gasped. "Leave me, both of you—leave me! I cannot—I can never speak to either of you again!"

"You can, I hope, speak to both of them many times when you have listened to my story, Henrietta," said Mrs. Jennings, coming boldly forward at that moment.

"Henrietta!" repeated Mrs. Chevening. She threw her hands to her sides; a bewildered expression crossed her old face.

"Who calls me by that name?" she said. "Henrietta! I have not heard the sound for—for twenty years!"

"Yes, you have; it is not so long ago as that," answered Mrs. Jennings. "Don't you remember your old friend, Letitia Jennings?"

"Letitia!" said Mrs. Chevening. "Letitia, I did not even know you were alive!"

"Well, my dear, I am both well and alive, a happy woman in many ways, although I have known sorrow, and although I have a sorrowful task before me at the present moment. Now, Henrietta, whether you like it or not, you have got to listen to a brief story. You shut Alexis, your only son, out of your life. He has just returned to you after enduring the punishment which was due to another."

"To another?" repeated Mrs. Chevening, "the punishment which was due to another? Ah, no!" she

added with a harsh laugh, "it has sunk into my heart; it has sunk too deep—I cannot be mistaken now. He was punished for his own crime, the very first of his race who had fallen to dishonor."

"Mother!" cried the stern man in the background. He came a step forward and then stood still.

"I cannot help it, Alexis; I am a proud woman, and it is impossible for me to forgive you. I could have forgiven anything else, but that you should have forged a check, that you should have had to go to prison for your sin, that you should have gone through penal servitude, that one of my very own house should have been so terribly disgraced! No, Alexis, I cannot speak to you, I cannot forgive you. You have no right to force your way into my presence, and to shelter yourself, too, behind a woman. I can only say that it is like you—yes, it is like what I might have expected!"

"Then let me tell you, grandmother," suddenly cried Hero, unable to restrain herself a moment longer, "that every word you are saying is untrue from beginning to end! This man, this man here is my father; look him in the face, Grannie! Do you think he could be cowardly with that look? Gaze at him well, Grannie; see for yourself that you have made a big mistake."

"Hero, I shall turn you out of the room if you say another word!" said the angry old lady. "You are no grandchild of mine! You followed in your father's footsteps—like father, like daughter!"

"Yes, like father, like daughter," repeated Mrs. Jennings; "very like, very like, indeed. Henrietta, I have something most painful to tell you as far as I personally am concerned. If you will cast your

memory back a little, you will remember that I, too, was the mother of a son."

"Yes, I recall old times," said Mrs. Chevening. "You must excuse me, Letitia, but this has upset me a good deal; I must sit down, for I can stand no longer."

The old lady seated herself; there was a blazing spot of color on each cheek; her eyes, cold still in expression, began to shine with a queer, excited light. Mrs. Jennings also took a chair, which she occupied with great dignity.

"Henrietta," she began, "we are both of us over eighty years of age. Before long we shall be called away to our long account to answer to God Almighty for our own sins, our own shortcomings. It is our duty to forgive, as we hope in all due time to be forgiven ourselves."

"Don't talk to me of forgiveness," said Mrs. Chevening.

"Please let me proceed," answered Mrs. Jennings. "In this case, my old friend, you have not to forgive your son—your noble son—for he was innocent; he bore the punishment of another. He did what he did to shield another. Arthur, my boy, my one only child, was the person who committed the forgery. He was weak. I knew that he was weak, and easily led, but I never, never guessed that he would stoop to that. Still, it is true—he confessed it himself. I only found out the truth a fortnight ago."

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Chevening. Her words came out very slowly and distinctly now. "Letitia, what do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I say. My boy is in his grave. He has been in his grave for the last ten years. He was tempted, but before he died he left

a full confession of his sin behind him. Through an extraordinary mistake, which I cannot account for, that letter never reached me until a fortnight ago. I was very ill at the time of his death, and refused to look into anything. I would receive no messages, I would consult with no friends; I was frantic at the loss of my boy—he was the one sunshine of my life. I did not know—I could not guess—that he was so faulty, so frail, so sinful. His letter was put away into a secret drawer, with many other relics of the past, and it only got into my hands, as I said just now, a fortnight ago. But Alexis here knew all about it from the first. The two boys were together. The crime, through a chain of circumstantial evidence which we need not go into now, was brought home to Alexis, who could only clear himself by inculpating my son. He knew Arthur's weakness, and he made up his mind that, if Arthur would not confess, he would bear the punishment for him. Surely he was noble—noble as few are. My unhappy, unhappy boy has been long in his grave. Will it not be possible for you to forgive the dead?"

"Have you your son's letter here?" asked Mrs. Chevening.

"Yes; I brought it down with me; you can read it now, if you like."

"I won't read it; I have something else to do first. Alexis, my son, come here."

Mr. Chevening came forward; he dropped on one knee by his mother's side.

"Let us talk no more about it, mother," he said. "My punishment is all over; it is an old, old story now. I never meant Mrs. Jennings to find out. Some day I will tell you all the circumstances. You will see, mother, that I could not have acted otherwise."

"You could not have acted otherwise?" repeated Mrs. Chevening.

"No, mother; not under the circumstances. 'Noblesse oblige,' you know."

"And you thought it worth while to break your young wife's heart—to break my heart—to nearly ruin your child?"

"Say no more about it; the past is past. Let us bury it. I have come back to you—receive me as your son at last."

Mrs. Chevening bent suddenly forward.

"I am a weak, sinful old woman," she said in a strained voice, which no one had ever heard her use before. "Kiss me, Alexis; it is you who have to forgive me. My heart of adamant seems broken. Hero, child, you can come back to me. Kiss me—I am your grandmother."

A week later a merry party of girls met at The Gables. Barbara Underhill was at home once more. The flat in Strawberry Mansions had been given up and the furniture sold. There were few traces now about Barbara of her recent severe illness. The cloud which had so oppressed her spirit was lifted; her voice, on the present occasion, was the lightest, her laughter the most contagious, of any of the four girls.

It was October, but the day was a specially fine one, and the four were in the little garden, waiting for Hero, who presently rushed in at the wicket gate in a state of wild excitement.

"Here I am!" she cried, "but really I had almost as much difficulty as I had months ago to get away. Grannie will scarcely let me out of her sight. I just begged for half an hour, for I felt I must come to welcome Barbara home again. Oh, Babs! you can-

not imagine how lovely it is at The Hall, now that father has come back—everything is completely altered. Mrs. Gunning is put into her right place, a great many new servants have come, and part of the house is to be refurnished! and Grannie walks about with father, and leans on him, and chats with him, and laughs. And if it were not for dear, dear Mrs. Jennings, I don't think I should have a single care in the world."

"But what about her? The whole thing is dreadful, is it not?" said Rosamond.

"Yes, it is; but she is so noble herself, and she bears up so bravely. Grannie wants her to come to The Hall to live, but I don't think she will, although I have quite made up my mind to spend at least half the year with her, for, next to father and Grannie, I love her best in the world. I consider her the dearest and sweetest old lady in England."

"What a dreadful man that son of hers must have been!" said Rosamond.

"He was really more weak than bad. Father told me the whole story one night. I will tell it to you girls some day. Oh, how proud I am of father! Even though he has been in prison, and has gone through penal servitude, I think him quite the greatest man in the world. Yes, I am a truly happy girl to-day. How nice everything is! How sweet your home is, too! Barbara, you won't regret Strawberry Mansions now that you have returned to this dear little place."

"I never want to think of that dreadful time," replied Barbara in a low tone; then she added, linking her hand through Hero's arm as she spoke, "This morning, Hero, I had a long letter from Miss Clarkson. She wants me to go and stay with her the next

time she is in town. She and Mr. Parkinson have behaved so well about that wretched book—oh! how thankful I am it was not published!"

"Some day, Barbara, you will write a really noble book."

"When I am worthy, which I am not at present," replied Barbara, with humility new to her. "Hero, I have made up my mind, I am just going to be a farm-girl for the next two or three years. I tried to stand on my own feet, and failed miserably; but now it is all right."

"All right! Everything is all right," said Clementcy, dancing up at that moment. "Oh, do come to tea, girls—it is ready. For my part," added Clementcy, "I don't believe there ever was such a merry, happy, happy life as ours."

THE END

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